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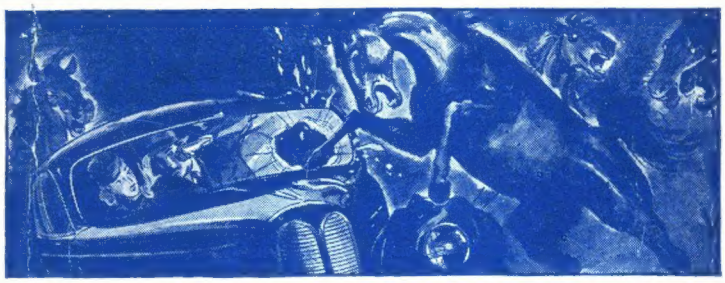

"THEN, GROPING FRANTICALLY, I found our flashlight, flashed its brilliant beam into the eyes of the nearest horses. Blinded, they hesitated... then retreated in a rout. Thanks to dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, we came out of our adventure alive.

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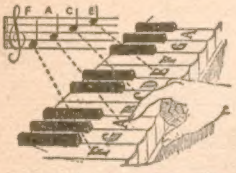

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AND

THE CHUCK WAGON.....A Department 10
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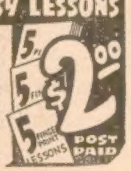

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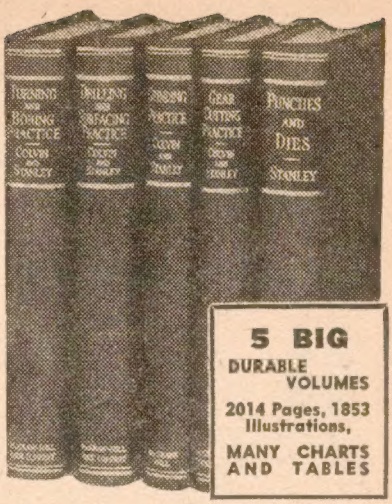

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Conducted by FOG HORN CLANCY

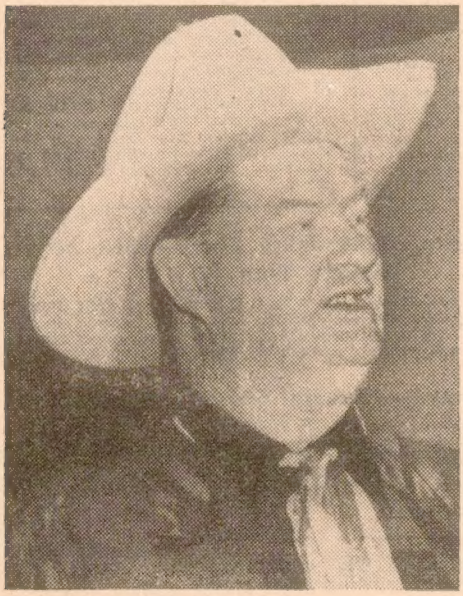
America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, Waddies. Here I am banging on the triangle at the Ol' Chuckwagon again and inviting all of you in for another feed. Plenty of beans seasoned with sow bosom, sourdough biscuits cooked in a dutch oven, strong hot coffee boiled in an old-fashioned coffee pot and not brewed in any new-fangled perculator or dripolator, and with all this there goes one of the most talkative cooks that ever piloted a chuckwagon over the range of anybody's spread!

Well, now for a little range and rodeo gossip while you saucer and blow your Java. Tex Ritter, the tall dark-haired singing cowboy who used to sing around the rodeos in New York before he went to Hollywood, is in the middle of work on another picture now. He spent the holidays visiting in and around Prescott, Arizona.

A Bear Story

Dick Shelton, giant cowboy, who for a decade has been one of the tops in calf-roping and bulldogging, and who was badly injured in bulldogging at a rodeo in Beeville, Texas, in September, recovered and staged a rodeo in his home town, Tilden, Texas, in November. Bob Calen, cowboy radio singer and fancy roper of Fort Worth, and Tad Lucas, former champion all around cow girl, were among those taking part.



Fog Horn Clancy

Speaking of Dick Shelton reminds me of a story Captain Daniel E. Fox of the New York State Troopers told me. The Captain said that Dick was standing at a bar in a saloon when a little fellow came in, and after looking Shelton over, and sizing up his sturdy frame, was so impressed by the size of the big fellow that when Dick turned toward him the fellow said, "Gee, Mister, if I was as big as you are I would go right out and fight a great big bear." Dick just smiled and replied: "Well, pardner, you don't need to worry about your size. There are a lot of little bears."

It is reported that Bill Clemans of the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation has negotiated the purchase of the Cuff Burrell string of bucking horses for the corporation. This addition should make the corporation own the greatest string of buckers in the entire country.

Gene Autry's Rodeo

It is reported that Gene Autry, singing cowboy of the movies, after his great success in making personal appearances and singing at a number of rodeos last year, including the Madison Square Garden and the Boston Garden Rodeos, will in all probability put out his own rodeo organization this year.

It is known that John Harris of the Harris Amusement Company of Pittsburgh, Pa., who annually stages the rodeo at Duquesne Garden, Pittsburgh, where Gene made his first rodeo appearance last season, has been negotiating with the singing cowboy for participation in eight rodeos this season. Failure to close the deal so far is causing the rumor that Gene will have his own rodeo.

The Original Cowgirl

Lucile Mulhall, the original cowgirl and the world's greatest cowgirl or fem-

(Continued on page 12)

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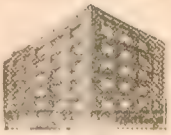

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(Continued from page 10)

inine steer roper, was killed in an auto collision on the highway just north of Mulhall, Oklahoma (the town named for her father, the late Col. Zack Mulhall) on Sunday morning, December 22nd.

I had known Lucile for forty years. I worked for her father when she was but sixteen years old, and at that age she was a great steer roper, a great rider and fancy roper. She could work a bunch of cattle with the best of the masculine cowhands of the range, and received more publicity than any other cowgirl who ever lived.

I have seen bankers give her checks up to a hundred dollars just for the publicity they would receive when she rode her horse into the bank and up to the cashier's window to cash them.

I worked for Tom L. Burnett, owner of the Triangle Ranch of Texas, when she was Mrs. Burnett. The bank account to which she had access ran almost into millions. She wore thousands of dollars worth of diamonds, but as in the case of Will Rogers, who started his show career with her father in St. Louis in 1899, money did nothing to spoil Lucile's kindly, genial disposition.

The Toast of New York

When Col. Zack Mulhall took a picked bunch to New York in 1905 as an added attraction to the horse show in Madison Square Garden, among them were Will Rogers, Jim Minick (who later was one of the country's greatest polo players) and Lucile, but Lucile was the favorite with the New Yorkers.

When Lucile Mulhall was just a girl the Late President Theodore Roosevelt visited the Mulhall ranch and from him she won a bet by running down a lobo wolf, roping it from the saddle, and killing it with a stirrup iron.

She had crowded into her years more experiences, had heard more praise, and had established a wider reputation than befalls the lot of most persons. She had captured New York City with her fetes of skill with horse, gun and lariat; she had played before kings and queens in Europe at command performances and heard their lavish compliments.

Fifty-six years old at the time of her death, she was married twice. Her first husband was Martin VanBergen, a noted baritone. They had one child, a son, Logan, who now lives in Santa Monica, California. Her second husband was Tom L. Burnett, millionaire Texas rancher and oil man, who died two years ago. The Texas town of Burkburnett was named after his father.

Lucile Mulhall was buried the day after Christmas on what is left of the once great Mulhall ranch, as a cold rain whipped across the bleak homestead where she had lived a retired life since her separation from her husband, Tom Burnett, in 1922. So muddy was the field in which her grave was dug that horses had to be employed to pull the hearse to the grave.

In attendance with a few other notables of wild west activities was Col. Zack Miller, last living member of the once noted Miller Brothers of 101 Ranch and wild west fame.

It seems just a little odd that the weather would cause horses to be associated with the last rites of the world's greatest horsewoman—horses, her first and greatest love, drawing her remains to their last resting place.

The Machine Toll

The death of Lucile Mulhall by auto brings to mind that machines have taken their toll from the West's noted, including the following: Joe and George Miller, of the 101 ranch; Skeeter Bill Robbins, the cowboy sheriff of the silent screen days; Lee Robinson, one of the fastest calf ropers the West ever produced; Tom Mix, of Wild West and movie fame; Ed. R. Henry, Secretary of the Fort Worth, Texas, rodeo; Mrs. Mea Lillie, wife of Major Gordon W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill), and Will Rogers, whose death occurred in Alaska in a plane wreck.

"Diamond" Ted Lewis (the diamond part being a nickname on account of having diamonds set in his front teeth) has been in Honolulu presenting his rifle and revolver shooting act with a circus, but has returned to the U.S. and will in all probability be seen at a number of rodeos this coming season.

Dan Hines, general manager of the H. J. Lutcher Stark ranch, near Orange, Texas, has been named as arena director of the Houston Fat Stock Show Rodeo—February 5th to 12th. Everett E. Colborn, of the Lightning C. Ranch near Dublin, Texas, will be the producer.

Winter Rodeos

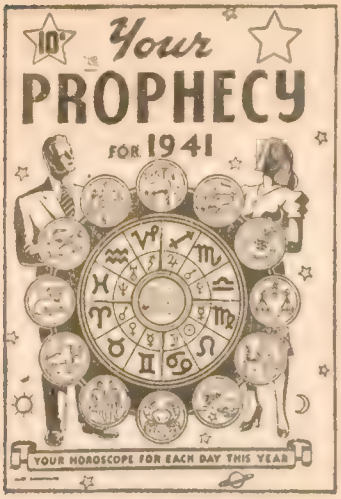
Among the rodeo hands wintering in Florida and working the winter rodeos of that state are Doc Blackstone, Bill Sawyer, Leonard and Peggy Murray, Pricina Clark, Chip and Pee Wee Morris, Jack and Beryl Jackson, Bill and Mary Parks, Mexico Slim, Alvin Parshal, Buck Dowell and Buddy Mefford.

At the third annual convention of the Southwest Rodeo Association held in Woodward, Oklahoma, December 16th, James O. Selman, a prominent rancher who is chairman of the Woodward Elk's Rodeo Committee, was elected president. Scott D. Hamilton, connected with the rodeo at Fort Smith, Arkansas, was elected Second Vice-President. Allen Finch of Dalhart, Texas, was re-elected First Vice-President and C. A. Studer of Canadian, Texas, was re-elected Secretary-Treasurer.

The season's title winners under the Southwest Rodeo Association were announced by C. A. Studer, Secretary, as follows: Vic Schwarz, all-round champion, and also champion bronc rider. Clyde Burk, champion calf roper. Gene Ross,

(Continued on page 126)

Your Horoscope For the Entire Year!



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Dunn's fist drove hard into Breen's solar plexus, doubling him up (Chap. VI)

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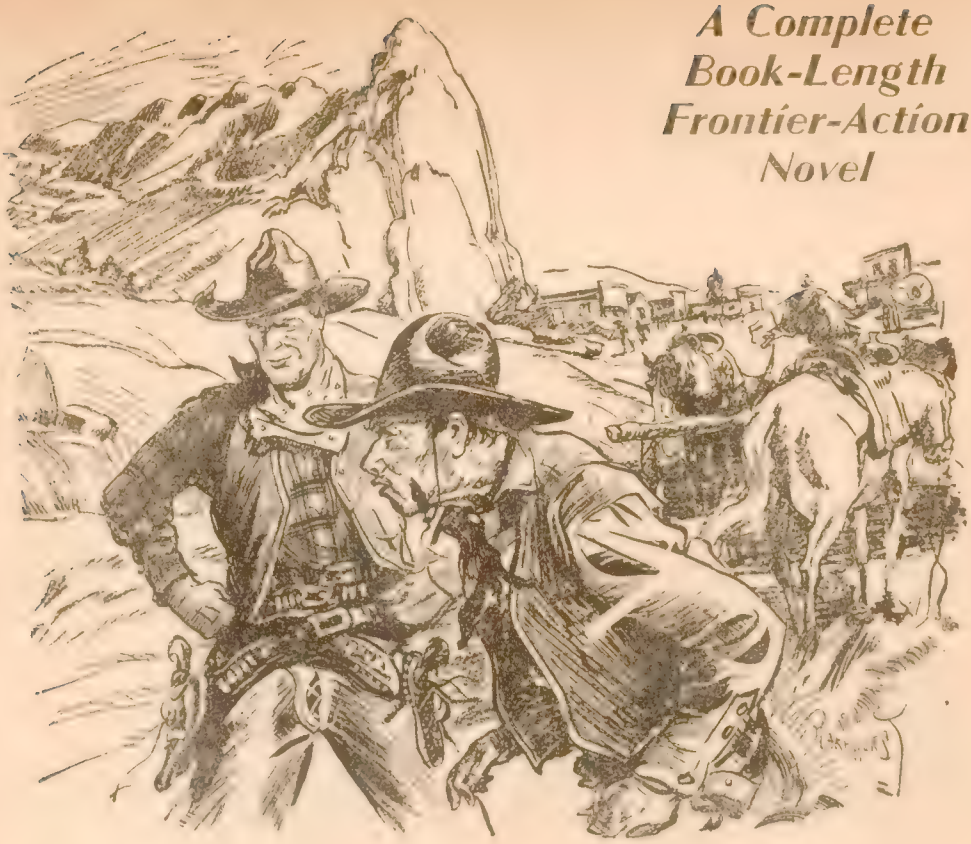

HOSS THIEF HACIENDA

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Author of "Bullet Harvest," "Murder in Gold Canyon," etc.

A Saddle Tramp Follows His Nose Back Home—Bringing Two-Gun Law and Order to a Rangeland Torn by Greed!

CHAPTER I

Mustangers

BEFORE "Tramp" Dunn, as he let his horse drift to a halt, the mesa wall pitched down in ledges and naked granite scarps, until its plunge ended on the billowing gray-brown wasteland below. There was no sound at that moment, and somehow the smother of silence was significant to Tramp Dunn.

He let his eyes travel on across the wastes of swale and coulee, where even the sage and mesquite were sickening of thirst. He looked up to the ragged haze-blue bulk of the distant Whetstones and the small, scattered clouds above that scarcely dulled the white glare of the brassy sun.

But while his eyes traveled and sub-

consciously recorded everything, his mind brooded on the travel-worn letter in his pocket. It had followed him across two states, reaching that remote cowtown in New Mexico only to be forwarded on and on, until it had finally found him here, almost within sight of the Arizona border.

The message still haunted him, returning again and again, as if it had been etched into his brain. Now as he thought of it, his lips went hard and a shadow of bitterness crossed his face. Lean frame stiff and erect, he sat in his saddle, and the words of the message floated before his vision as he had last read them.

Dear Clay:

I don't know where this will find you—or if it ever will—so I can only send it to where we last heard from you, and hope.

Something has happened to your father. We don't know what, for he has disappeared. We found his bloodstained hat near one of his horse traps, but no more, although we have searched day and night for the last week. We have about give up hope.

If this reaches you, please come at once, for we need you here very much.

Roy and Beth Mackey.

A buzzard soared into the high blue of the sky, as if on invisible wires, but Tramp Dunn did not see it. Nor did he hear the horseman who moved up beside him until Tom Ackers spoke up quietly.

Clay Dunn

"Yuh'll be headin' for home, I reckon."

TRAMP DUNN turned in his saddle. He nodded.

"As soon as we find the gents who rustled our hosses, I'll be goin' home, Tom," he said.

Tom Ackers' lean shoulders jerked impatiently. There was a hard set to his angular jaw, and the stamp of cynicism and bitterness in his dark face.

"Blast yore hide, Tramp Dunn!" he snapped out. "I know what yuh're thinkin'. I don't need no help. This is my fight, savvy? It ain't jest our hosses that was stole. There's a lot more behind it that I've never told yuh about."

Dunn smiled crookedly.

"As long as I can remember, I've wanted to see what was on the other side of the hill," he said slowly, and not without a trace of self-contempt. "I left home when I was nine. A gal give me the name of 'Tramp,' because I used to tell her the places I was goin' to see when I got older. Yeah, I've shore lived up to that name ever since. Nobody calls me Clay Dunn no more. I've met all kinds of men, Tom. Whatever it was yuh didn't tell me, it don't make no difference to me. Yuh hauled me out of that landslide and patched me up, and that's enough for me."

Ackers snorted harshly.

"Jest because yuh think I saved yore neck, yuh ain't rushin' home like yuh should!"

"Yuh think I could do anythin' now, Tom?"

"Hang it all, there's a chance!"

Dunn shook his head bitterly.

"Dad was a wild hoss hunter like you," he said. "Yuh know what chances he had to take. And yuh know what that bloodstained hat and his disappearin' means. He was throwed and mebbe kicked by a hoss

he was trying to break. Then he was dragged away through the rocks—"

He broke off, as if his thoughts condemned him. Then he continued stiffly.

"If I'd been home, mebbe I coulda prevented that. But I wasn't. A half a day won't make no difference now. I got a hunch I'll be able to help what Dad died tryin' to do more by gettin' the money I got comin' from the hosses we trapped. So I'm stringin' through with yuh on this, Tom."

Ackers jerked his hand savagely.

"We ain't got a chance, Dunn. Yuh might as well know it. For five years folks around here have been out to get me. It's because of what my dad was —a killer—and they won't give me a break. But that ain't all. There's a hoss syndicate working from this end of the border to Texas. Nobody knows who's the head of it, but it's a shore bet Ben Slade and Haze Bennett and Link Cochran was in on the stealin' of our hosses. When I brace 'em about it, it'll mean a fight."

Tramp Dunn chuckled softly.

"I never been called bashful in a ruckus," he said in his cool drawl.

Tom Ackers smothered his gratitude and affection for the young waddy with an oath. Without another word he swung his mount into a jogging trot along the mesa rim. Tramp Dunn followed quietly, feeling the tension of what was to come build up within him in a tangible pattern of impending disaster. For somehow the silence of the morning spoke of coming violence and death.

IT would be like all other such fights—an explosive outburst of words, hands that plunged downward to claw at gun-weighted holsters, a blatant roar of shots, death striking swift and hard and violent. These things Tramp Dunn knew as he settled back against the loading chute, waiting.

Jason Breen

Before him, young Tom Ackers faced the horse buyer on wide-planted legs, lean frame racking with tremors of anger that quivered the length of his body. His face was paper-white, drawn thin, bracketed at the edges with deep-etched lines of bitterness. His eyes, at once hot with rage and cold with hatred, narrowed and widened as he fought to control the storm of his flaring temper.

"That's a rotten deal yuh're tryin' to run on me, Slade!"

His voice rang out piercingly, throbbing the length and breadth of the bordertown street. Up and down the double row of buildings, men turned as Tom Ackers' hot words struck them, glanced apprehensively at each other, then began drifting toward the railroad shipping pens. Ackers' voice ran on, gathering bitterness and anger with each word.

"You and Haze Bennett and Link Cochran are robbin' me, like yuh've done to every other wild hoss hunter around here. But I won't take it layin' down. I need that money me and Tramp Dunn was to get for them broncs we trapped. I aim to have it, Slade! You three rustled them hosses from us, and yuh know it!"

"Rustled them? Yuh shore got brass, throwin' that kind of talk at me, Ackers!"

The horse buyer's thick voice cracked out in a lash of temper. He twisted half-around toward the shipping pens that flanked the rails. Tramp Dunn, standing at one side, saw Slade's eyes dart to something beyond the pens, in the direction of the freight cars standing on the siding.

A furtive movement there caught Dunn's quick glance — the fleeting vision of a man crouching at the end of one of the cars, gun leveled, eyes like chips of jet. An icy draft drove up Dunn's spine. This was a murder trap! And as the thought flamed across his brain, he saw the horse buyer spin back to face Tom Ackers.

"Rustled them?" Slade sneered. "Yuh can't pull that mangy trick on me, Ackers. Yuh ain't the only hoss hunter around here. Haze Bennett and Link Cochran was out, too. They trapped the hosses I got penned here. Mebbe yuh better start provin' these are the hosses yuh had—if yuh had any in the first place."

Slade's deliberate implication struck Tom Ackers like an invisible fist, bringing the gray of ash to his face. He laughed harshly, veins swelling to cord his neck.

"Shore, yuh'd ask for proof!" he flung back bitterly. "Yuh know I can't prove anythin'. Yore men had a ten-hour start on us when we found our hosses had been rustled. We tracked the herd here, but the tracks are sanded over by now, and yuh know it. But that stockinged grulla yuh got in there was in our herd. And that claybank with the black splash on his flank—"

Slade's flat lips thinned out, and an ugly glint flared in his cold eyes. Tramp Dunn tensed, an inborn sense of danger jangling across his drawn nerves. Behind him, he heard the boots of the townsmen cease their nervous scuffing. Someone smothered an oath. The silence was made unbearably tense by the sound of Slade's hoarse breathing and the restless thudding of hoofs in the corral. Abruptly Slade's mocking voice cracked out.

"Ackers, yuh might as well try somethin' else. Yuh can't rub me down with yore threats. I wasn't born yesterday, and I know yore reputation. They hanged yore old man for hoss stealing. Yuh're tryin' about the same thing now. I don't scare easy, and jest because yuh're slick with a gun, I ain't talkin' soft."

Tramp Dunn saw the dark tide of color wash into Tom Ackers' face, then ebb swiftly to the gray of chill fury.

"Easy, Tom," Dunn said quietly. "This is a cold deck. We can't—"

Ackers' voice broke him off short. The words were measured, deliberate, as if he spat each one out as it was formed in his throat.

"Slade, I'm makin' no excuses for my dad, and neither am I takin' any lip from you. Yuh're talkin' high, Slade. Don't make me kill yuh!"

CHAPTER II

Murder by Proxy

A FLICKER of fear kindled in the horse buyer's dark eyes, then was blotted out by flaring rage. His thick lips trembled slightly. Slowly his right hand inched upward along the front of his coat, to where something bulged under his left armpit. A hacking laugh burst harshly from his throat.

"Yuh're jest itchin' to go bad, ain't yuh, Ackers? Jest like yore old man!"

Tramp Dunn's lean body snapped rock-hard. He whirled around, fac-

ing the freight car where Slade's gunman had crouched. Puzzlement and a warning of danger flashed over his brain. The gunman was not there. His searching glance jerked up the tracks. No man was in sight, either along the line of freight cars or near the shipping pens.

He pivoted, eyes cold and bright and deadly, as he faced the townsmen pushing back out of the line of fire. Beyond the onlookers, he could see a big man, with a sheriff's star pinned on his shirt, lumbering forward at a run. Dunn started to turn on Ackers, halted his movement, grimly conscious that nothing could stop what was about to come.

Slade's face was gray beneath the dark blood that hammered through his veins. His eyes were narrowed and glassy. His lips worked under the lash of fear and hatred.

"Throw yore gun on me and yuh'll be doin' murder, Ackers," he said ominously. "I'm no gunslick, but I ain't backin' down."

His right hand went up under his coat, not fast, not slow. Tom Ackers waited with deadly intent, lips set in a cold smile, every line of his body showing balance and poise and the hard-gripped tension of a coiled spring. He waited until Slade's hand started out toward the open.

His hand flashed down to his hip. Blue steel blurred, glinting off little splinters of sunlight. The gun swept up, bounced, roared, gushing smoke that was pierced by a pale finger of orange flame.

Horror and pain rushed into Slade's eyes and face. He swayed backward under the shock of driving lead, caught himself with an effort, rocked forward. His mouth gaped open, but words refused to come. Only a thin worm of blood crawled over his lower lip and into the beard-stubble on his chin. Then slowly his head turned, eyes rolling toward the freight car behind which the gunman had crouched. Only then was he able to speak in a broken, halting whisper.

"Gawd, he—he didn't—"

Abruptly his knees sagged and he pitched forward into the dust. A bony finger traced the length of Tramp Dunn's spine as he saw Slade's hand slide limply from under the front of his coat. He heard the hoarse oath that burst from the lips of one of the townsmen behind him.

"He wasn't packin' no gun, jest reachin' for his handkerchief. That was nothin' but murder!"

MURDER! The realization of what had happened drove like a white-hot flame through Tramp Dunn. He whirled, bleak lights flaring in his slate-gray eyes. Tom Ackers stood as if stricken, a thin wraith of smoke pluming upward from his gun, as he stared at the empty hand of the man he had killed. Harsh voices snapped with scorn and contempt through the hush of silence.

"Ackers is jest like his old man was—too blame easy with a gun. And he'll go jest like his old man!"

"Right before our eyes! We'll string the dirty skunk sky-high for this job. Lynch him!"

Tom Ackers spun to face the crowd, eyes bitter, his features drawn and white.

"But I didn't know!" he said hoarsely. "How could I know? You'da done the same. He was reachin' where he always packed his gun, wasn't he?"

The sullen rumble that ran through the townsmen quickened to the roar of a mob. Watching narrowly, Tramp Dunn saw the sheriff try to break through from the rear, fail as the mob shifted forward.

But Dunn was quicker than the mob's movement, striding out at an angle that brought him in close to Tom Ackers. Something in his cool, unhurried movement, in the suggestive brushing of his hands on the jut-

ting butts of holstered guns, struck warning to the townsmen. They faltered, then stopped. He smiled coldly, eyes bleak and hard.

"That's smart, gents, pullin' up like that," he said easily. There was no harsh edge to give rancor to his soft tone, and yet menace was there. "Don't change yore mind and come on, or someone might get hurt bad. Colt law is as good as rope law when it comes to murder, and I won't stand by and see yuh jump the wrong man."

At the front of the crowd, a lean, slab-muscled individual hunched forward, an ugly glint in his dark eyes. His right hand sank almost imperceptibly down toward his holstered gun.

"The wrong one?" he sneered. "You tellin' us we can't see straight, when this murder was pulled off right under our noses?"

Tramp Dunn nodded calmly, his smile only increasing the chill of his eyes.

"That's about right," he drawled. "Ackers killed Slade, but he didn't murder him. You done that, mister!" Like a whip, Dunn's last words lashed out. "Which one of Slade's double-crossin' polecats are you—Bennett or Cochran?"

Mounting anger washed a dark tide of blood into the tall man's narrow face. Close by his side a short, slope-shouldered man rolled forward to the balls of his feet, thinned lips twitching nervously.

"He's Bennett," the tall man said with festering virulence. Gathering truculence throbbed in his rising tone. "I'm Link Cochran, if yuh're fishin' for names. Mister, yuh got gall, spreadin' yore big talk out like that! I murdered Slade, huh? Hanged if I'll take that! I was standin' here watchin' the same as everybody else, when young Ackers pulled off his kill job."

Tramp Dunn's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yeah, and that's when yuh done that murder," he said in soft mockery. "Only yuh didn't have to use a gun, Cochran. Yuh had it figured too slick for that. Yuh let Ackers do the dirty work for yuh when yuh decided to get rid of Slade."

HAZE BENNETT'S stunted body went stiff and motionless.

"Link," he said in smothered harshness, "if he keeps spillin' his lip—"

Link Cochran's hand jerked violently.

"Shut up!" A tremor ran the length of his body, as if he fought under the lash of storming emotions. When he spoke, his voice held a low note of smoldering venom. "So I walked up and asked Tom Ackers to murder Slade for me, and Ackers said yeah, since he'd always figured he'd like to be hanged!" Cochran's sneer broke on a short, barking laugh. "Go on and sing yore song, mister. Yuh're Ackers' pard, and I reckon he'll have company when we string him up."

A harsh murmur swelled through the townsmen who looked on. They shifted, hard-pinched faces mirroring grim intentions. From the corner of his eye, Tramp Dunn saw young Ackers work up to his side, a faint, bitter smile shadowing his white lips.

"This mob still remembers my dad," Ackers said cynically. "Yuh can't stop them, Tramp. Try it, and they'll hang yuh along with me."

No expression broke the bland lines of Tramp Dunn's face. His body was slouchingly at ease, and yet there was a tense poise and balance about it, a readiness that was only faintly hinted by the glint of his hooded eyes.

"Yuh had it worked out neat, didn't yuh, Cochran?" he said softly. "You was to act like yuh was workin' across the tracks when Slade made his play. Yuh knew Slade wouldn't stand a chance against Ackers, so yuh had him take his gun off. Then Slade was to bait Ackers into a fight, thinking yuh'd cut in from across the tracks at the right time.

"But yuh crossed Slade. Yuh let him see yuh back there, ready, then pulled out when he made his play. Mebbe Ackers killed Slade—but you did the murder, you belly-crawlin' sidewinder!"

Link Cochran's narrow face darkened, then washed gray, and the flames of murder-lust flickered and flared in his eyes.

"Yuh're a liar, Dunn!" he roared in fierce anger. "Yuh'd frame me if yuh could, but I ain't aimin' to take it. Yuh'd like to make me sore enough to go for my gun, wouldn't yuh? But I ain't obligin' today."

Sudden fury leaped into Tramp Dunn's ringing yell of contempt.

Beth Mackey

"You polecat, what do I have to do to make yuh draw? Yuh murdered Slade the same as if yuh'd pulled the trigger yoreself. If I have to shoot yuh to pieces, I'll make yuh talk."

"Look out, Tramp!"

Tom Ackers' voice was high-pitched, piercing. Dunn caught the fleeting glint of Haze Bennett's gun snapping into the open. He had drawn it under the cover of Cochran's back. The weapon swept upward in a savage arc. Dunn threw himself wildly to one side, felt the hot breath of death fanning his cheek as the gun blared. Instantly his own weapons were in his hands. They recoiled at the burst of flame and smoke.

BENNETT'S stunted frame seemed lifted bodily from the ground by the impact of driving lead. He stumbled backward, spinning. Then he tripped and pitched full into the townsmen who were milling forward, dragging at holstered guns.

There was no holding the crowd after that. From somewhere back in the mob, a shot blasted out, and a hot iron seemed to rake along Dunn's ribs. He felt an instant of weakness as he twisted to one side, guns swiveling. But he knew that nothing human could turn back the lynch mob now.

He spun, broke into a crouching run toward the shipping pen a few yards away. In one flashing glance he saw the gate straining against the weight of pitching, trumpeting wild horses penned inside. He leaped to the gate.

"Tom!" he yelled. "This way!"

He caught the upper lock-bar that held the gate shut, pushed against it. He couldn't move it against the weight of the horses milling behind the gate. A slug whipped past his neck, ripped splinters from the post a few inches from his head.

He cursed softly, faded a pace to one side. For an instant the horses milled back from the gate. He threw his weight against the lock-bar, skidded it back, then leaped wildly to one side as a surging mass of horseflesh shocked into the gate. Wood splintered, shattered under that crushing charge of fear-crazed horses. The animals boiled out, trumpeting, hoofs thundering.

Dust clouded upward in a rolling gray pall, and dimly through it he saw the townsmen scattering for cover. He spun as a hand gripped his shoulder. It was Tom Ackers, lean face pale, lips drawn bitterly.

"You gotta run for it, Tramp,"

Ackers yelled. "This ain't yore fight. They're after me more because they hated my dad than because of Slade. We'll split, and I'll lead them off."

Tramp Dunn laughed harshly. His hand raised, slipped into the pocket of his shirt and brought out several folded papers. He shoved them into Ackers' hand.

"They'll tell yuh where to go," he flung out. "I've got a hoss ranch down in the Huecos. Dad left it to me when he was killed. Use them papers and go under my name. Folks down there ain't seen me since I was a kid, and they won't know the difference. Now rustle, blast yore stubbornness. I'll lose this lynch pack for yuh."

CHAPTER III

Disaster Range

FOR a moment Tom Ackers hesitated, then stumbled toward his horse when Dunn's hand shoved him along. Dunn leaped to his own mount, threw himself into the saddle and pulled the reins free from the corral rail. He swung the animal, holding it grimly, a mirthless half-smile on his wide mouth.

It struck him odd that he was doing this for a man he hardly knew, yet Ackers had saved Dunn's life at the risk of his own. Now Tramp was repaying that debt by waiting behind to lead off a law posse while Ackers escaped to a hideout under his name. He chuckled softly, but there was no humor in the sound. Always, as far back as his memory stretched, it seemed that he had hunted the far horizons and always trouble had haunted his trail. Jobs like this were made for gun tramps like himself.

Behind him the last of the wild horse herd boiled out of the shipping pen. Dust swirled and thinned under a shifting desert breeze. Already men were piling on to saddled horses. When they saw him, they yelled harsh oaths and swung their mounts with savage intent. Guns blared and crashed as Tramp Dunn swung his horse around the loading chute and down the line of freight cars.

Across the sage-studded stretch ahead of him lay the trackless upheaval of the Whetstones, their craggy bulk looming against the pale blue of the sky. Once there, he could lose the posse that meant to dog his trail. And maybe after that he could head south and east toward the distant Huecos and the horse ranch. He remembered them only faintly through time and the tumbleweed trails he had followed.

And with that thought came the memory of the letter in his pocket and the picture it painted of a blood-stained hat, of his father being dragged to his death behind a plunging wild horse. His lips pinched flat and hard. He wondered if the storm clouds of death and destruction were not already forming along the border, wherever there were men who chased the thundering hoofs and flying manes of the wild horse herds.

* * * * *

"SO yuh're Clay Dunn." Roy Mackey's words were blunt, carrying neither friendliness nor antipathy. Tom Ackers looked around to see a short, square man of uncertain age, a blocky jaw, thin lips and fathomless steel-gray eyes.

A galling sense of distaste rose within Tom Ackers. He didn't like the deceit of this rôle he had to play, and yet he knew there was no other recourse. He forced a smile.

"Them papers are enough to tell who I am, I reckon."

Roy Mackey leaned back in his chair, his face hard and without expression.

"They tell enough, all right," he said pointedly. "Without them, yuh could be any Joe Cowboy for all we'd know."

Ackers let silence build up between them, unable to trust himself to words. He knew how Mackey felt. Dunn had been a wanderer all those years when he had been needed most, and now that there was perhaps little he could do, Mackey thought he had returned.

Ackers let his eyes be pulled back to the girl's face. Beth Mackey wasn't tall, but there was a quality of strength about her that was unmistakable. The flowered dress she wore molded a slender body and seemed to cast lights into her rust-brown hair. Her face was an oval that showed the touch of sun and wind. Her eyes, blue and wide-spaced, were both kind and reproving.

"Well, yuh're back, so that makes yuh boss," Mackey stated. "What are yore plans?"

Ackers looked around at Roy Mackey's hard eyes.

"What about—Dad?" he faltered.

Mackey's mouth was drawn in a thin, inflexible line.

"Seems to me yuh oughta wonder about that."

Beth spoke up in a strained, anxious tone.

"Uncle Roy, please!"

Roy Mackey's jaw relaxed, and some of the stiffness left his square shoulders.

"All right, forget that crack I made," he grunted. "But I reckon yuh know how I feel, you leavin' home when yuh was jest a kid, to chase yore nose all over the country—"

Tom Ackers broke in softly.

"Sometimes a kid will do a thing and not know he shouldn'ta done it till it's too late, Roy."

Mackey shrugged and leaned forward to place his blunt-fingered hands before him on his desk.

"Then we'll leave what yuh did at that," he said gruffly. "Anyhow, yore old man didn't kick about it, so I reckon I got no call to get steamed up over it."

"What about Dad?" Ackers quietly asked again.

Mackey's clenched hands unknotted slowly to press the palms down on the desk top.

"We never found a sign of him," he said. "Hoss dragged him, I reckon. Gawd only knows where."

The smother of silence closed in again. Ackers could feel the eyes of the girl and Roy Mackey upon him, but he didn't let an expression reach his face. He waited, hating himself for being drawn into this deception. Wondering where Tramp Dunn was at that moment, he listened to the little nocturnal noises that floated through the open window to his ears —the nearby whicker of a horse, the distant wail of a coyote.

"You been running things here, Roy," he said almost harshly. "Yuh're still boss. What's my job?"

A strange light leaped into Mackey's sun-faded eyes, but not a muscle moved in his face.

"There's plenty to be done, and little help to do it with. I ain't been able to find any wranglers with the nerve to buck this border syndicate and hire on here. But the big job is trappin' wild hosses. If yuh want to take that over, it's yores."

BETH MACKEY took a quick step forward, pallor striking her face.

"Not that, Uncle!" There was anxiety in her voice. "He's not familiar with the country, after being away so long. It's too dangerous. If he should run into any of Breen's men you know—"

"Thanks, ma'am," Ackers broke in stiffly. "Mebbe I don't know the country well, and I don't know this here Breen jasper, but I can generally

take care of myself where there's trouble."

Roy Mackey smiled queerly.

"Yuh'll find that's as big a job as huntin' wild hosses," he said levelly.

"Then I'll start them both in the morning," Ackers answered, eager to get out of the room. "I reckon I'll aim for the bunkhouse and turn in."

The girl caught him as he started to turn. Her face had not regained its color, and her eyes were wide, searching.

"Aren't you going to use your old room, Clay? It—it's just the same as you left it. Your father wanted it that way. He always looked forward to the day you'd come back. He wanted things kept just as you'd left them, so that when you got here it would be just as if you'd never been away."

His face hard and tight, Ackers picked up his bag and followed the girl across the room. She was like a slender flame in the gloom of the hall. He paused at the door when she stepped into a room, trying to steel himself for what was to come.

He heard the scratch of wood on grit, and the darkness of the room was pushed back by the flickering light of a match. When lamp glow flooded the room, Ackers stepped through the door.

The girl stood before him, her eyes on him, as if trying to search out the emotions he was trying to keep hidden.

He tried to look around the room, and found that he couldn't. His eyes were held to the girl, taking in the softness of her lips, the warm smoothness of her skin, the little lights that were dancing in her hair.

For a moment bitterness flooded through him like a flame. All these things had been denied him—a home, the respect of honest men, this girl whose silence spoke of faith and welcome and remembrance of the past, whose eyes told of something infinitely more deep. Then Beth Mackey smiled.

"See, everything is just as you left it. Your old hat is still on the peg in the wall. You took your good one with you, you remember. You took the rifle with you, but the cartridge box is still on the table where you emptied it into your coat pocket. Everything is the same, Clay. Even I'm the same."

Savagely Tom Ackers told himself that he didn't have to go through with this.

Tramp Dunn had paid his debt to him. They were square now. He would slip out during the night, and Tramp would understand when he got home.

"I'd like to be left alone, Beth," he said, his voice low and strained.

She came toward him quickly. He didn't try to move away. Her hands caught his arms and her face turned up toward his. He saw the mist in her eyes.

"You don't have to feel bitter, Clay," she said softly. "You didn't know what you were doing. You were just a boy. Your father understood and I understand. We've needed you here to help finish what your father was trying to do."

SUDDENLY she paused, laughing softly, the color rising into her cheeks.

"Remember what you did the day before you left here? You said you'd do it again when you got back, when I slapped you for it. You're back now, Clay."

She stood on her toes and pressed close to him. Her face came nearer, until it became a white blur to Tom Ackers. Then her lips touched his and held. Fire ran between them, striking a conflagration in Ackers' unwilling heart. Tom Ackers stood stricken.

Then he jerked away from her, his face a white mask of pain.

"Get out," he said hoarsely. "I told you I wanted to be left alone, didn't I?"

Minutes after the girl had closed the door behind her, he stood in unmoving silence, staring toward the black night beyond the window.

His lips still burned. Bitterness surged through him like a living storm, but through it all he remembered what she had said.

She needed him. She had thought she was talking to another man, but strangely that no longer seemed to matter. She needed his help until Tramp Dunn got home. As far as Tom Ackers' memory stretched, he had never felt that anybody needed him.

HE crossed the room woodenly and lowered his hand over the lamp globe, watching the guttering flame flicker and fade and then die out. The black of night closed over Tramp Dunn's boyhood room.

Ackers kicked off his boots and fell across the bed, his brooding eyes turned toward the star-studded sky beyond the window. He tried to shut out thoughts of the girl from his mind, but her face close to his still haunted him.

What help could he give her in the few short days before Tramp Dunn reached home? Perhaps it would be but little. But whatever it was, he knew with grim certainty that there would be danger. The feeling of impending disaster that had gripped him had grown into an almost tangible pattern since he had reached the Dunn ranchhouse.

He lay there wondering about the man Beth had called Breen, and the disappearance of Tramp Dunn's father, and the part the border syndicate would play in the violence and bloodshed to come.

The hour's had waned to early dawn when Tom Ackers finally fell into a troubled sleep.

The maddened horses charged free (Chap. II)

CHAPTER IV

Red Dawn

OVER the high-flung bulk of the Guadalupes to the east, the sun had risen the third time when Tom Ackers halted his horse on the crest of the ridge. Here the up-draft of air that struck his face bore the tang of mesquite and sage, and a warmth that gave mute promise to the heat of the coming day. As he had done each morning since he had reached the Double D horse ranch, he let his gaze travel down the slope of the ridge and across gray-brown swell and coulee to the distant ranchhouse.

From here the sprawling building was a miniature, stunted by height and distance. The corrals behind were strung out like interlaced lines. The rising run was fading the last shadows of night from the deeper swales, and the gold and red and purple banners in the dawn sky were gradually losing their fine color.

A faint movement at the side and below caught his eye, and he twisted around in his saddle. For a moment the movement was lost to him as his eye searched the broken wasteland.

Scarcely more than a mile from him was the brown hump of the Huecos that loomed grim and forbidding against the high blue of the sky. But his eye held to the lower levels, until his gaze halted on a faint, low-hanging pall of dust.

"Too big for a bunch of riders," he muttered, "and nobody would be drivin' cattle through there." He stiffened, a glint striking his narrowed eyes. "By thunder, it's that white stallion's *manada* of wild hosses Mackey was tellin' me about!"

The mustangs streamed out of a draw, running hard, to swing up a low rise and stop there. A thrill drove down Ackers' spine as he stared at the white stallion. No wonder old Hank Dunn had tried so hard to capture these horses!

Even from this distance Ackers could make out the clean, powerful lines of the stallion. The horse stood at the crest of the rise, his neck arched, nostrils distended, mane and tail flowing in the gentle breeze.

This was no ordinary mustang like the gimlet-hammed and narrow-chested broomtails Ackers had found so often in his traps. This was a horse of good blood that had escaped from some rancher, or the descendant of stock left behind by the ancient *conquistadores* who had passed through this country.

As he watched, the stallion led his *manada* forward again at a hard run. Ackers pulled his mount back to the cover of an outcrop of granite, every muscle of his body suddenly taut and alert. The stallion was leading his band to the waterhole almost directly below Ackers. Beyond that, farther up the rock-choked draw, was the bottleneck where Ackers had built his brush and pole trap.

The breeze would bring no warning odor to the stallion. Ackers grinned, watching the horse tide roll toward him. The white stallion picked its way without slowing its pace through the rocks and cactus tangles that clogged the mouth of the draw. Behind it came claybanks and pintos, grullas, blacks and moros, through the billows of saffron dust.

Ackers waited, his eyes hard and bright. He felt the shiver that rippled across the flank of his mount as it caught the scent of the oncoming *manada*.

"Steady," he whispered. "Steady, Blue!"

The white stallion soon reached the waterhole, paused a moment, test-

ing the air. It was magnificent in poise and balance. Then as the colts and mares buried their muzzles in the water, Ackers started his mount forward.

He rode slowly at first, angling toward the mouth of the draw behind the wild horse herd, then with swiftly increasing speed that pounded into a hard run as he struck the down-drop of the ridge. His high-pitched, ringing yell split the tension of morning silence.

"Hi-yi, yippee! Rattle yore hocks, yuh four-legged devils!"

The horses whirled away from the waterhole, startled, hoofs plunging as they milled in alarm. The alarm whistle of the stallion split the air. The herd wheeled toward the mouth of the draw, then sheered off in panic as Ackers came hurtling down before them to block their way.

Yelling, Ackers spurred his mount toward them. Again they spun, terror striking them, to thunder back up the draw. Twice they tried to fight their way up the steep slopes on either side of them. Both times Ackers closed in to drive them back into the depths.

Rapidly the walls of the draw steepened and closed in. Through the swirling pall of dust, Ackers saw the mouth of his trap just ahead of the herd. The stallion halted his mad run with the caution of the wild at the trap's opening. He wheeled, biting, kicking, whistling as he fought to turn his herd, but terror rode with the mares and colts behind him. The sheer weight of their numbers carried him into the trap.

Ackers closed in at a furious pace, his hoarse yell ringing out over the thud and beat of hoofs. At the mouth of the trap he jerked in on the reins. The iron shoes of his horse screeched through showering gravel, and he hit the ground at a run.

He caught the heavy pole gate, swung it shut, knocked the bar into place. He was barely in time. The tide of wild horses turned toward him in a mad rush. White-lipped, he jerked out his gun as they stormed toward him. The blare of his shot into the air halted their charge toward the gate, turned them back. A moment later they were milling nervously within the enclosure.

Ackers relaxed, a grin of triumph on his hard lips. A glint of satisfaction was in his eye as he surveyed the trapped mustangs. There were no culls in this band. They were all clean-limbed and deep-chested.

"No wonder old man Dunn tried so hard to catch this herd," he whispered softly. "Fifty head here, and they'll all bring forty dollars with the right breaking. And that white stallion will bring a hundred or more at any hoss sale. All right, Mister White Star, you and me are makin' friends here and now!"

He returned to his mount, pulled two ropes from the horn of his saddle, and took his position near the heavy gate post. He made a loop, waited tensely until the herd milled closer. Then his hand swung up and out.

The loop spun out like an uncoiling snake. The horses whirled, squealing, fighting each other, as the loop settled around the neck of the stallion.

ACKERS took a quick hitch around the gate post and braced himself for the shock. The moment the rope touched its skin, the stallion reared in panic, plunged his full weight against the rope, crashed back heavily to the ground.

"You white devil, yuh'd bust yore neck, if I'd let yuh," Ackers breathed in admiration.

He waited until the rest of the herd fled to the far side of the enclosure. This his second loop shot out. He gave the rope a flip, suddenly jerked hard as the noose closed around the forelegs of the stallion. Again the horse went down.

Ackers worked swiftly after that. It was a wild chance to take, but he pulled himself hand over hand up the rope. Then he threw himself forward to ear down the head of the fallen horse.

A rear hoof slashed savagely toward him, and he ducked back, cursing softly. He flipped a hitch around a hind leg, jerked it tight, caught the other, knotted the rope and leaned back, breathing rapidly.

Still pinning the horse's head down with his knees, he pulled a cloth from his pocket and tied it over the stallion's eyes. Blinded, the animal stopped struggling and tried to puzzle out the abrupt darkness.

Grinning thinly, Ackers turned and climbed through the gate rails to his mount. He returned with a blanket, hackamore and saddle.

He dropped the saddle to the ground. Talking in a low, crooning tone, he slowly lifted the stallion's head and slipped on the hackamore. A shiver ran the length of the horse's body, but it made no fuss.

"Shore, now, yuh ain't so tough," Ackers said, his voice a low, soothing monotone.

He slipped his hands down to pull off the leg ropes. The horse rolled quickly to his feet, but he didn't plunge or pitch. Ackers slid the noose from around the animal's neck, then ran his fingers around the stallion's ears, scratching all the while.

"Yuh figure yuh're dynamite, all cocked up and ready to explode, but yuh ain't," Ackers crooned on. "That blind over yore eyes took all the fight out of yuh. Yuh're all bluff, Mister White Star. You and me are gettin' acquainted pronto."

He bent, still scratching the horse's neck, and picked up the saddle-blanket. He smoothed the hair carefully on the stallion's muscled back, then spread the blanket.

The horse settled a bit, powerful muscles bunching along his flanks. He laid back his ears, but he stood quietly. It was when Ackers was reaching for the saddle that the voice spoke from behind him.

"Yuh won't need that, Dunn! Turn around here and keep yore hands high and wide!"

TOM ACKERS jerked around, a cold wind whipping through his veins as he saw the gunman behind him. The man stood with the lower part of his body hidden from view by the boulders that flanked the rails of the horse trap. A wide-shouldered man with a low-pulled hat, his pale eyes were like chips of ice over the top of his bandanna mask.

Ackers' lips thinned into a flat, hard line. His right hand, splayed out tensely, began a slow downward movement toward his holstered gun.

"I reckon you're the Jason Breen jigger I been hearin' so much about," he said tightly.

His hand halted, trembling slightly as the masked man's gun jabbed out savagely.

"Fiddlin' around that cutter is a good way of gettin' yoreself killed, Dunn."

A hot tide of anger flared and stormed through Tom Ackers. He swayed forward to the balls of his feet, every nerve in his body strained to the snapping point. He read the cold purpose in the gunman's eye. He knew death lurked there, but he laughed in contempt.

"After what's b e e n happenin' around here, I reckon any gent that don't smell polecat is due for some trouble!" he whipped out. "All right, yuh're holdin' the gun. What's in yore craw? These hosses I trapped, huh?"

The gunman shook his head slowly. He reached his left hand into his pocket, brought out a folded paper.

"Not hosses," he said thinly. He sent the paper spinning through the air to land in the dust at Ackers' feet.

"Sign it," he ordered, an ominous edge to his voice. "And don't open it, if yuh know what's good for yuh."

Ackers stooped, snapped erect, staring at the paper in his hands. Then his eyes jerked up, narrowing and widening as he fought against the lash of his temper.

"This is a bill of sale to the Double D!" he ripped out harshly. "And you want me to sign it?"

"I'm tellin' yuh to sign it, Dunn," the gunman said softly.

CHAPTER V

Gunman from the Grave

UNDER the silence that fell was a danger that had almost a taste and smell to it, a stagnant substance which held no strangeness for Tom Ackers. It seemed that as long as he remembered he had known this bated hush that warned of violence and bloodshed to come. His father had lived by these moments and died by them. They had been Tom Ackers' heritage.

"And if I don't sign it?" he whispered.

The masked man chuckled dispassionately, but the sound held a promise of doom. He rocked back the hammer of his gun and the dull, metallic click was loud in the hush.

"Yuh'll sign it," he said in bleak softness. "If yuh don't, I'll forge yore name on that paper. Yuh been gone from here a long time. Nobody will know the difference, and yuh won't be around to tell them. So I reckon yuh'll sign, Dunn."

For a moment a shadow fell across Tom Ackers' lean face, deepening its stamp of bitterness and cynicism. He looked around at the wild horse herd that huddled in a nervous mass at the far end of the enclosure, at the white stallion. Its proud head was high, neck arched, the powerful body quivering slightly, held by the cloth over its eyes and Ackers' hand gripping the hackamore.

Ackers' gaze traveled on, across the dun wastes of the draw to the high-flung bulk of the Huecos, to the fading red blush of the dawn sky. There his eyes rested a long moment, as if he tried to fasten every shifting color firmly in his memory.

Then, gray streaking his set jaw, his gaze pulled back around. His voice was cool and distinct.

"I never amounted to much, Breen, or whoever yuh are," he said slowly. "I never knew what it would be like to have a home, or a father—and mebbe a girl—who cared what happened to me. But I know now, even if all that wasn't for me. I had a girl kiss me and tell me she needed the help I could give. That was enough to make up for everythin' I ain't never had. Mebbe I can't help her against you or the hoss syndicate, but I can do all I can to give her what help she thought she could get from me. I ain't signin' yore paper, mister!"

He looked down, ripping open the folded sheet. The name that had been hidden by the fold seemed to leap up and strike him. His face drained white and his eyes flashed up, scorn, contempt and hatred in their depths.

"You dirty, yeller-bellied polecat!" he ripped out hoarsely.

"I woulda killed yuh anyway, Dunn!" the killer breathed.

The Colt stabbed forward over the boulder. There was a black burst, a spurt of red, a roar.

Spinning wildly, Tom Ackers felt the white-hot lance of pain that plunged high up through his chest. Every atom of strength in his body went into the snap of muscles that threw him to the back of the wild

stallion. As his arms went around the neck of the animal, he saw a sheet of red spill over his right hand.

A second crashing shot blared from the rocks behind him, but he didn't feel the whip of the close-passing slug. He heard the thunder of hoofs and knew that panic was driving the wild horse herd toward the gate of the trap.

The stallion was pitching, but somehow he managed to hang on. His spurs raked along the animal's white flanks and the horse lurched forward. He felt the heavy shock of flesh striking the heavy gate. His right leg went dead. The horse pivoted in terror and Ackers' left foot lashed out and up, kicking off the lock-bar.

The gate started to swing open. Everything seemed to happen in a blur after that. Distantly he heard the killer's hoarse-yelled oath and knew that the gunman was running from the boulders for another shot. The mustangs were all around the stallion, kicking, pitching and squealing as they fought their way through the gate. He could feel the horse's hair, the rough saddle-blanket under the fingers of his clenched hand.

Through the chaos of hoof and dust and plunging bodies there came another crashing shot. The roar struck Ackers' ears, drove deep, swelling, growing until it burst over his brain in a blinding flash of light that was lost as abruptly as it had come. He sank into smothering waves of empty darkness.

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"I WAS afraid something like this might happen, and figured I'd better ride after you," Roy Mackey said minutes later.

He slid out of the saddle beside the girl. Beth Mackey looked up slowly. There was no color in her face, no tears in eyes. They held only numb hurt and disbelief.

"He was like this when I got here. I heard the shots and came as quick as I could. He'd captured White Star. See, there are white hairs on his saddle-blanket. He was getting ready to break White Star when—" Her voice broke, then went on, dull and with a stunned lack of emotion. "He turned White Star loose and pulled off the blindfold before he fell."

Roy Mackey's square face was a bleak, hard mask as he stared down at the huddled body.

"So Dunn's dead," he said slowly and heavily.

The girl nodded wearily.

"Yes. He's dead."

* * * * *

THE strain of the past two weeks had stripped ten pounds from Tramp Dunn's lean frame. His eyes were hollow and red-rimmed from loss of sleep, and the pinch of his flat lips hinted at the inner tension that gripped his nerves.

He halted his jaded horse at the edge of town, where the weather-beaten buildings thinned out. Here ended the vague and disconnected memories that had stirred within his brain as he had ridden through the town. Here again, as his eye traveled the thirst-sickened stretch before him, he felt the return of the nameless premonition that had gripped him since he and Tom Ackers had parted.

His brooding gaze pulled around to angle away from the rut-riddled road toward the scattering of people. They stood with bared heads, while one of them spoke in a low, droning monotone.

It wasn't much of a place to have a funeral, that rock-studded graveyard. Chico brush and spiked cholla grew in scraggly little patches between the grave markers, which were rough-hewn slabs of wood that had been twisted and bleached by the ravages of sun and wind and sand.

There were five men and a girl around the fresh mound of dirt that marked the new grave. The parson stood at the head of the grave, the murmur of his low voice reaching Dunn's ears through the smother of silence.

At one side, three men looked on silently, with neither reverence nor grief in their faces. The man in the middle was big of body, rock-jawed. Even from this distance Tramp Dunn could see the small dark eyes that peered from under the heavy black brows. The other two were of a kind, stringy, spare and cold-featured.

Dunn's shifting glance halted on the two standing at the foot of the grave. The man was short and square, with a blunt, cleft chin and unreadable gray eyes. His hair was an iron-gray mane, unruly, unkempt. Recognition stirred and gathered strength within Tramp Dunn.

"Roy Mackey!" he murmured. "Shore that's him. But he's changed. Harder, and I reckon with a good reason. And that gal with him must be Beth."

For an instant the years slipped back from Tramp Dunn. He had hardly been old enough to straddle a pony that far-distant night when he had slipped away from home. Then Roy Mackey had been his father's foreman only a short time, a hard-working ambitious man. And Beth Mackey he remembered only as a freckled, pig-tailed kid who had called him Tramp. He had said that when he grew up he was going to follow his nose where it led him instead of settling down to the horse ranch his father would some day leave him.

She had also changed. She was tall now, slender in her split riding skirt and loose blouse. He wouldn't have known her had she not been at her uncle's side. Dunn studied her, wondering at the changes that the span of years had made.

Her face was a pale oval under the wide-brimmed hat she wore, and as again Dunn watched, her eyes raised to the man beside her. Her lips trembled. Then her eyes lowered again as Roy Mackey stooped, picked up a spade and began scraping loose dirt into the grave.

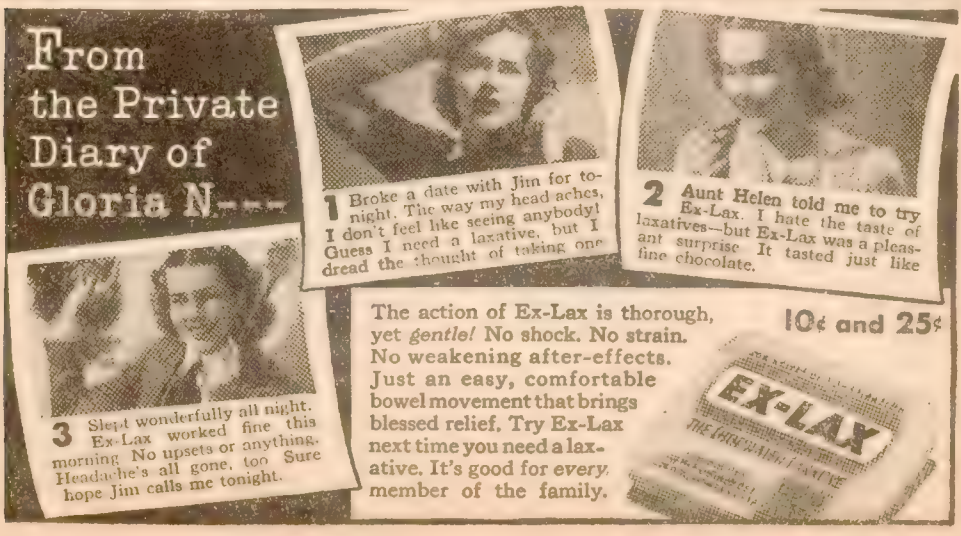
The parson's low words floated clearer to Dunn's ears on a faint stirring of air.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust—"

Another voice broke in.

"Take care of yore hoss, stranger? He shore looks done in."

[*Turn page*]


From the Private Diary of Gloria N---
1 Broke a date with Jim for tonight. The way my head aches, I don't feel like seeing anybody! Guess I need a laxative, but I dread the thought of taking one
2 Aunt Helen told me to try Ex-Lax. I hate the taste of laxatives—but Ex-Lax was a pleasant surprise. It tasted just like fine chocolate.
3 Slept wonderfully all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning. No upsets or anything. Headache's all gone, too. Sure hope Jim calls me tonight.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX

TRAMP DUNN twisted around to see a short, bandy-legged man limping up behind him. The man grinned crookedly and went on in a creaky voice.

"Seen yuh ride up. The way business has been around here lately, I reckoned I'd best go out and get you, instead of waitin' for yuh to come in mebbe." He caught the faint stiffening of Dunn's lips. "Don't figure I'm bein' disrespectful to what's goin' on over there," he said without a change of tone. "Boot Hill has been gettin' so many customers the last few months, we've sorta got to takin' these plantin's as a matter of course."

Not a muscle moved in Dunn's face to give him a hint to his quickened interest.

"Who's been doin' all this grave filling?" he said.

The livery man's answer came in a crochety growl.

"Some gents think the hoss syndicate has been stirrin' up this ruction. Other folks think it's Jason Breen and his men, but they don't say it out loud. This younker they're plantin'—"

"Who's Breen?" Tramp Dunn cut in, his voice careless.

The livery man's faded eyes squeezed up slightly and shifted under Dunn's fathomless stare. He shrugged his stooped shoulders.

"Breen's about everythin' around here, seems like," he grunted. "He don't take a likin' to strangers, so if you're a gent with good judgment—"

"I ain't. Keep on talkin'."

A nervous twitch came to the man's lips and a guarded light crept into his sun-faded eyes.

"Suppose yuh just forget I let my mouth pop open," he said in a growl. "I never did have no sense when it come to talkin', so yuh better take yore questions somewhere else. Not knowin' nothin' about nothin' is the best way to stay healthy around here."

Tramp Dunn smiled thinly, his eyes going bleak. He sensed the fear that had laid hold of the livery man with the mentioning of the name "Jason Breen." The man started to turn back to his office, but Dunn's long arm reached down to pull him back around.

"Wait a minute," he drawled, and there was a thin, metallic edge to his voice. "Yuh don't need to be scared of me. I hear things, but I don't repeat them. And I ain't one of Breen's men, whoever he is. Yuh started to say somethin' about this gent they're buryin'. I'm wonderin' about that. Suppose yuh go on talkin'. When yuh're through, I'll forget who told me."

A shadow of gray crept over the livery man's weathered face. His faded eyes wavered from Dunn's hard face to a point directly over the saddletramp's shoulder. Dunn tensed, a tangible pattern of danger building up within him. He knew that there were several men behind him.

"Suppose you ask Jason Breen them questions, mister!" a cold, deadly voice grated.

CHAPTER VI

Who Goes There?

DUNN turned, every muscle of his body shifting and tensing imperceptibly into a position of readiness for trouble. There was no more expression than mild interest in his face. His eyes were cool, but the deep, steady glitter in them spoke of a dangerous quality that was not apparent in his indolent bearing.

The three men who had been at the burial stood two short paces from

him. The big man was slightly in front of the others, his broad jowls dark, small eyes holding naked truculence. His voice was harsh with venom.

"I'm Jason Breen, stranger. Yuh act like yuh're havin' some trouble keepin' yore nose to yoreself. That's a good way to land neck-deep in trouble around here. What are yuh so curious about?"

A faint smile that held no humor touched Tramp Dunn's lips. Here was a man, he judged narrowly, who would stop at nothing to beat down anyone who had the temerity to oppose his iron will. His hard, inflexible ruthlessness was apparent in every line of his face and body. Breen's companions bore out Dunn's cool appraisal. They were killers by every sign he could read in their faces, chill-eyed, dispassionate, grimly proving their profession by the way their hands hovered near low-sheathed Colts.

"First off," Tramp Dunn drawled without a change of tone, "since yuh're so obligin', Mister Breen, I'd like to know how come there's a general notion that yuh mighta had somethin' to do with fillin' that new grave over there."

Jason Breen rocked forward slightly on wide-planted legs, his full lips planing into a flat, hard line of anger.

"I don't know a thing about that killin'," he said.

"Which is a natural answer, I reckon," Dunn returned coolly. He heard footsteps approach from one side, then halt in the silence. He knew that Roy Mackey and Beth were looking on. But he didn't pull his attention from the three men before him. He said: "I'm also wonderin' how strong yuh're in with this here border hoss syndicate I've been hearin' about."

Only in the slight flaring of his nostrils did Jason Breen give hint to the rising storm of his anger. All movement had ceased along his powerful body, as if the latent deadliness of him were coiling for an explosion of violence.

"Keep yore tongue waggin' and yuh'll be wonderin' yoreself into an early grave, mister," he said menacingly.

The festering virulence of Breen and the two men standing beside him struck a grim note of warning to Tramp Dunn. Cold reason told him to let the matter slide, but some nameless wild quality prodded him on. If there were to be trouble on the Double D, he wanted to get it over with.

Again he spoke quietly, watching Breen's hands splay out slowly over his guns.

"Seems to me an innocent gent don't get his hackles standin' right up when he gets a few questions throwed at him. You act like I been trampin' on a sore toe."

Breen's white-banded lips curled.

"Yuh're jest itchin' for trouble, ain't yuh?"

"If yuh're what yuh act like—yes!" Dunn said.

He slid forward in a swift, long stride to catch Breen's hand as it plunged holsterward. He jerked the hand up before it arrived, threw his weight into a twist that spilled the gun from Breen's fingers.

Then he spun. His right fist drove hard into Breen's solar plexus. Air exploded from Breen's lungs under the shock of the blow. He bent forward as if jerked by a string, only to be snapped erect by Dunn's left.

TRAMP DUNN was whirling to the other two gunmen as Breen's knees crumpled under him. He caught the splintered gleam of light shunting from naked gun metal, faded to one side as the Colt roared. He felt the quick heat of flame against his side, the tug of lead ripping through his shirt.

His hands reached out to clamp on the shoulder of the gunman as the weapon swiveled for a second shot. He shoved out. Then, as the man rocked off balance, he jerked him around and sent him spinning into his partner.

Dunn stepped back, his own gun whipping out and up as the two men fought clear of each other.

"All right, you two! Tie in yore horns, or yuh'll ask for what yuh'll get!"

All movement of the two gunmen halted at the whip-crack of Dunn's voice. It was as if they had been frozen for the moment, their pose and stare speaking of virulence that seemed ready to explode in spite of the warning of Dunn's weapon.

From the corner of his eye, Tramp saw Jason Breen climb softly to his feet. There was murder-lust in Breen's dark eyes, in the jerk of his lips and the uncontrolled quivers of hatred that racked his body. But he was all the more deadly because he made no move toward his guns. His voice came low and harsh.

"Meet Ray Poole, on yore left," he said with bleak mockery.

Dunn nodded coolly, narrowed eyes measuring the venom in Poole's glare.

"Howdy, Poole," he drawled. "If yuh'd throwed yore slug a little more to the left, mebbe yuh wouldn't be standin' there now like a polecat smellin' hisownself. Put up that cutter, mister, if yuh ain't goin' to use it."

Not a muscle moved in the hard mask of Poole's face, and his voice had neither tone nor emotion.

"I'm wonderin' if yuh're plumb lucky, or plumb good, feller."

"Yuh got a good chance to find out, Poole."

Poole shrugged his bony shoulders dispassionately.

"Some other time," he said in a cold promise.

"And Hack Estes, on the right," Jason Breen's harsh voice rumbled again.

Hack Estes' shoulders were hunched forward, dropping half-crooked arms toward his holstered weapons. His eyes were like jet, fired with orange flecks of festering savagery. He was smiling a strange, sneering smile, as if he saw some thread of icy humor in the situation.

"Yuh acted pretty shore how I'd end up, not makin' any play for yore guns, Estes," Dunn said coolly.

"And I won't be makin' that mistake twice," the gunman returned.

"I reckon not, Estes," Tramp Dunn drawled contemptuously. "It may be bad for yuh." Without moving his eyes, he turned his attention on Jason Breen. "You, Breen, I don't know what gives yuh the idea yuh're the big Sittin' Bull around here, but I aim to find out. That's why I came here, Breen. And if yuh've got yore hand in this mess, like I think it is, there's goin' to be Jason Breen spread all over this end of Texas."

BREEN'S hard lips curled, but the gray of ash rode up the line of his square jaw.

"Yuh talk a big war," he jeered. "But yuh won't have so much luck the next time. Yuh throwed yore spurs into Jason Breen, mister, and that's why I'm wonderin' what yore name is. We'll need somethin' to put on a grave marker for yuh, if yuh don't tuck in yore tail and run."

"Make it Dunn—Tramp Dunn!"

Jason Breen flinched as if he had been struck, and the gray along his jaw faded to a dirty white that just as swiftly flushed dark. Surprise struck Ray Poole's masklike face, but the sneering smile on Hack Estes' lips only etched the deeper.

Through the smother of silence that had fallen, Dunn heard the faint choked cry that came from Beth Mackey's lips. From the corner of his eye, he saw old Roy Mackey rock

Dunn's draw was almost too swift for vision as he met Poole's challenge (Chap. VIII)

back, then settle forward on wide-planted legs.

"Tramp Dunn?" Breen said in hoarse amazement.

"Yuh're a dirty liar, mister!" Ray Poole broke in harshly. "We jest buried Tramp Dunn!"

NOT until he had climbed back onto his horse, and ridden out of town with Beth and Roy Mackey, did Tramp Dunn relax his grim vigilance. Even then the weight of the swift-falling events built its deadly pattern upon his brain.

Jason Breen had claimed that Tramp Dunn was dead. That could mean but one thing. The few short days that had passed had brought death to Tom Ackers. A flood of bitterness rolled through Dunn as he swung his jaded mount down the dusty, pitted road.

He felt responsible for Tom Ackers' death. It had been his idea that Ackers take on the name of Tramp Dunn and ride here to hide from the posses that were searching the border for him. On the other hand, he had had no way of knowing what Ackers was riding into. He had had no reason to believe that affairs around the Double D had reached the stage of violence and bloodshed. There had been only a vague, nameless premonition, nothing tangible.

"So you're Clay Dunn," Beth Mackey said, her voice, low and faltering.

Dunn turned in his saddle to look at the girl. With her riding so close to him, the changes the years had wrought in her struck him even more forcibly than they had in his fleeting view of her in town.

He liked the touch of sun on her face, the gleam of her soft brown hair, the way her slender body swayed with the gentle, rolling gait of her horse.

But there was a doubt in her eyes that didn't escape him. He knew even yet that she found it hard to believe, though he nodded his answer to her question.

There was a faint note of truculence in Roy Mackey's voice.

"That's easy enough to say. None of us has seen Clay Dunn since he was a kid. How do we know yuh're him? What proof can you give us?"

Dunn grinned crookedly, reading the bald skepticism there in Mackey's hard eyes.

"Since yuh put it that way, I reckon there ain't no proof I can give," he admitted slowly. "Like I said, I give all the letters I had to Tom when I sent him down here."

Ray Mackey snorted in frankly unconcealed disbelief.

"That shore makes a likely story! How am I to know you ain't this owl-hooter, Tom Ackers? How do I know yuh didn't ride in here, figure this was a good thing, and change yore name all of a sudden?"

A file of anger scraped across Dunn's frayed, tired nerves. He twisted around in his saddle, glowering at the man who glared at him.

"You act like yuh don't want to think I'm Clay Dunn," he said with rising heat. "I said I give all my identification papers to Ackers, and that's the way it stands. Seems to me like yuh're mighty peculiar, Mackey!"

"Down here yuh don't trust nobody any more if yuh got any sense," Mackey flung back bluntly. "And don't let yore temper flare up at me, young feller! I ain't likely to curl up and purr when I hear a gent bark loud."

"Uncle, please!" Beth's voice broke out, strained. "We don't need any papers, if he's really Clay Dunn. He'll remember things. The other man we thought was Dunn didn't mention much about the past, did he?"

Tramp Dunn relaxed.

"I reckon we're both too ready to fire off half-cocked. Beth is right about this. Let's see what I remember most."

His gaze turned to the girl coolly, and he chuckled.

"I reckon one of the things that sticks hardest in my mind is how I kissed yuh the evening before I ran away," he drawled.

He saw the quick flush that rose in the girl's cheeks. It heightened her loveliness to a degree that made his heart leap.

"Things like that can be told to anybody," Roy Mackey snorted.

Tramp Dunn frowned slightly.

"I reckon Tramp Dunn wouldn't be likely to tell it around how yuh give him a larrupin' for tryin' to ride that hammerhead roan bronc none of the peelers could bust. And I remember the time Dad was throwed by a pin-eared bay he'd caught in one of his traps. He had to shoot it to keep it from killin' him before he could get out of the corral. And if I ain't got things twisted, about two weeks after you hired on, I heard yuh say yuh'd own more hosses than the Double D ever saw some day."

HE turned back to the girl, to see that all doubt had fled from her face. She was smiling at him and the friendliness in her eyes sent a warm glow through Dunn. But no change of expression had softened Roy Mackey's hard features.

"All right," he said in a growl. "I reckon that's enough proof for me. But what yuh remember won't hold water in court. With yore dad gone, yuh would be any Joe Cowboy to the law." Something jumped within Dunn, but before he could speak, Mackey went on gruffly. "Now that yuh're really back this time, what do yuh figure on doing?"

"Mebbe yuh'd better tell me what all the trouble is about first," Dunn said quietly.

"Nothing yuh ain't guessed already," Mackey returned grimly. "Hosses. There's a syndicate that's been forcing every hoss outfit to join and pay a high price for the privilege. Yore old man refused, and we've had trouble ever since."

"Yuh think we shoulda joined?" Dunn asked.

"It woulda saved a lot of trouble," Mackey said.

"And mebbe Dad's life," Dunn breathed bitterly.

"Mebbe that, too, but we never found any sign that he'd been murdered. Because he wasn't in the syndicate, he couldn't hire any bronc-peelers. He had to do the job himself, and he was too old. Way I see it, he just got throwed and dragged off some place."

CHAPTER VII

Death in Crimson

MOMENTS passed while a brooding silence built up between them. The landmarks they passed were bringing a strengthening familiarity to Tramp Dunn, and along with it a sense of loss. He wondered vaguely if what he had searched for through so many years and down so many roads had not been closer at the beginning.

Beside this old cottonwood, whose giant limbs were beginning to sag with the weight of years, his father had let him fan his first horse. There had been a breaking corral here then, but Dunn had been forced to stand on the rail to slap the blanket across the back of the wild mare. He remembered his father's slow, even voice.

"That hoss is wild as the wind, son, and mebbe fannin' him with that blanket don't seem like much to you. But that hoss will get used to it if yuh

keep at it long enough. Then the first thing he knows, he'll have a saddle on his back and won't think a heap about it. That's the same with any hard job yuh have to do. Take to it a little at a time, even if it don't seem much. Then the first thing yuh know, the whole job will be done."

Here by this rock-choked gulch he had seen a stallion kill himself, rather than submit to capture. Ahead, up the sage-mottled slope was where they had buried his first pony. Beyond that the road topped the crest of the ridge, and he knew he could look down upon his home for the first time in years.

Mackey's deep-toned voice jarred him back to the present. He turned to see the foreman's unreadable eyes upon him.

"What did yuh say?" he asked. "I was wonderin' how it will seem to be home again, so I didn't hear yuh."

"I asked if yuh was goin' to join the syndicate," Mackey repeated.

Dunn's lean jaw hardened, knotting muscles that twitched and rolled, as he shook his head.

"Dad didn't see why he should have to pay someone else for the right to sell what belonged to him. I feel the same way. I reckon not, Roy."

"Yuh'll bring a pile of trouble down on yore neck," Mackey warned. "Mebbe yuh oughta think serious about it."

Dunn grinned humorlessly.

"I'll see that a lot of the trouble goes back to the gent that sends it," he said grimly. A thought struck him. "When yuh found Tom Ackers' body, was there anythin' to show who shot him—anythin' that might be a clue?"

Mackey shook his head. "Not a thing. He was dead, and there wasn't anythin' to point to who done it."

"There might be one thing," Beth Mackey said haltingly. "Uncle Roy laughs at me for keeping it, but I couldn't help it. It was part of Tramp's—er—Ackers' saddle-blanket. It had some strange blood marks on it, and I cut that part out and saved it. I have it with me now."

She twisted around, reached into the saddle-bag behind her, and brought out a length of blanket. When she handed it to Dunn, he stared at the ugly brown-stained lines broodingly.

"Ackers' hands were bloody, and he made them marks when he was tryin' to hold onto his hoss," Mackey growled. "Beth kept the thing, but danged if I know why."

Dunn could not tear his eyes from the blanket. The lines Ackers' dying fingers had made with blood meant nothing, though he followed them, searching with his eyes.

THE ugly stains of blood told their grim story of a dying man fighting to stay on the back of a plunging wild horse. He looked up at the girl again, bitterness etching its harsh stamp in his features.

"I'll keep this, if yuh don't mind, Beth," he said slowly. "Mebbe it don't mean nothin', but then again, mebbe it does. Anyhow, I'd like nothin' better than to get a line on the polecat that murdered Tom Ackers." His gaze pulled around to Roy Mackey's square face. "Did yuh find any of the papers I give him on his body?"

Again the foreman shook his head, and a premonition that had no form or pattern built itself in Clay Dunn's mind. For he wondered broodingly if the murder that had been done did not presage others yet to come.

Early dawn wakened Clay Dunn. He was thankful that the night's rest had taken the soreness of long hours in the saddle from his body. He rose, stretched and grinned at his reflection in the mirror.

"No wonder Beth and Roy looked

at me like I was somethin' that had been popped out of the *brasāda!*" he chuckled. "Another day and I'da had to use a currycomb on my jaw."

He shaved, then went into the kitchen to seat himself at the breakfast table. Roy Mackey was already at the table, and his eyes held an unreadable glint as he surveyed Dunn.

"Yuh look a dang sight more human with all that brush off yore face," Mackey remarked.

Dunn grinned. "I feel more human."

He glanced at Beth, but she kept her eyes averted. He noted with silent approval the swift efficiency with which she prepared breakfast and set it on the table. He ate with relish.

"After fifteen and more years eatin' miserable grub and men's cooking, a meal like this shore makes me feel like I jest came to life," he complimented.

She flushed her pleasure, but if he had expected his remark to break the uncomfortable silence, he was disappointed. Understanding brought the return of bitterness to Dunn. He admitted without conscious thought that he had expected a more hearty welcome at his homecoming. He knew he didn't deserve that, though, for he had returned home only because of necessity and not choice.

Roy Mackey lay down his fork and shoved back his plate.

"Well, yuh're home, and that makes yuh boss. What are yore orders?"

Dunn smiled faintly.

"That's up to you, Roy," he answered. "Yuh know more about what has to be done than I do. I'll take up where Tom Ackers left off."

Mackey's hard lips didn't relax.

"Which is pickin' yoreself a dangerous job," he stated bluntly.

HE pushed back his chair and shoved to his feet, started to turn without further conversation to the door. Dunn halted him.

"Before I start to work outside, I thought I'd look over the books," he said.

Mackey chuckled without humor.

"And that's another job yuh're welcome to," he grunted. "The books are in the desk in the office. But if yuh look for figures that show cash, yuh won't find none."

Dunn's eyes widened.

"You mean we're broke?"

"Worse than that," Mackey snorted. "Yuh can't make money when yuh can't find nobody to sell hosses to."

A surge of anger poured through Tramp Dunn's veins.

"You mean this here hoss syndicate has got that big a hold on the market?" he demanded.

Mackey smiled grimly.

"Jest ask Beth about it. I've turned the whole rotten business over in my brain till I'm blue in the face. I'd

[*Turn page*]

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rather not talk about it unless I gotta. I got some mail to drop off in town, so I'll see yuh about noon."

He turned abruptly and left.

A palpable, strained silence fell after Mackey had gone. Dunn could feel the tenseness between himself and the girl. It drew on his nerves and lay like a dark cloud on his brain. Twice he started to speak and found himself at a loss for words. Beth Mackey broke the silence.

"I guess you'd like to know the worst."

Dunn nodded, watching the shadows that the morning sun, shafting through the window, cast across her face. She flushed, conscious of his keen scrutiny.

"It all started when the horse syndicate began operation," she said. "They tried to force your father into joining, but he refused."

"Which is the same thing I'da done," Dunn put in stiffly.

"I know, and I don't blame you for saying that, or your father for doing what he did. But I don't know whether it was worth it or not. The syndicate tightened down and most of the wranglers quit their jobs right off. The rest walked out after one of them was wounded and another murdered."

Dunn's lips flattened into a thin, hard line.

"The dirty skunks went that far!" he gritted between his teeth. "Don't anybody know who's the head of that outfit?"

The girl shook her head.

"They work it so nobody has been able to find out. You pay to get into the syndicate by leaving money at some spot they designate, and that's all there is to it. One rancher tried to wait around to find out who collected the money. He was found in the bushes with a bullet in his back the next day. Nobody tried that trick after that. If you pay the syndicate a third of your profits, you can sell your stock. If you don't pay, the market is closed. But I think there is something bigger than that behind it all."

Dunn snapped out a single flat word:

"What?"

The girl raised her eyes.

"The usual horse markets don't amount to very much in comparison with an organization the size of the syndicate," she said slowly. "One by one the horse outfits have gone broke, and they've all been bought out by someone who keeps his name hidden. I think whoever is behind the syndicate wants to get control of all the horse ranches, so the Army will have to buy from him alone."

Dunn stiffened in his chair.

"The Government business don't amount to enough to pay for the risks that polecat syndicate boss is takin'," he grumbled.

The girl's eyes were cool and steady on Dunn's hard face.

"It will if we go to war against Spain," she said quietly. "And that's apparently what is going to happen inside of a month. We'll be at war, and the Army will need plenty of horses to outfit the cavalry."

CHAPTER VIII

Ultimatum

THE truth of the girl's statement leaped across Tramp Dunn's brain like fire. For a long moment the shocked silence held. Then low, harsh words burst through Dunn's flat lips.

"The dirty coyotes! That's their game, huh? If one man owns all the hoss stock along the border, he can

get his own price from the Government." He paused, then continued gratingly. "How many outfits has the syndicate taken over?"

"All the small ones. The Double D is the only big ranch that's managed to hold out, and it can't last much longer."

"By thunder, we will hold out!" Dunn cried, smashing his fist down on the table.

Beth Mackey smiled with a trace of bitter tolerance.

"You can say that, but you don't know what we've been up against. You haven't been here to take what the syndicate has thrown at us."

The girl's implication drove deep into Tramp Dunn like a thin blade. He met her gaze levelly, trying to hide the thoughts that burned across his brain.

"Yuh don't think much of me, do yuh, Beth?"

Her eyes wavered.

"Should I?"

He shook his head with slow despondency.

"I reckon not. I been jest like that name yuh tacked onto me—a tramp. But I didn't know what I was doin' when I left home. I was a kid then, and I've moved around so much since then, I ain't never had a chance to know. But Dad started a job here, and I aim to see it through. It shore would be easier if I knew yuh was with me."

The girl's eyes steadied on his, reaching deep into him, searching, probing. Then slowly she smiled.

"If that would help—I'm with you, Clay," she said falteringly.

A warm glow churned through Dunn's veins. He started to reach for the girl's hand, halted the movement even as it started. He stiffened in his chair, head cocking to one side, straining his ears against the sudden silence that had fallen.

"Sounds like hosses comin' up," he said tensely. "A bunch of them!"

On the heels of his words, he heard the bang of a door and the quick thud of heavy boots. He twisted around to see Roy Mackey burst into the room, square face set in an expressionless mask.

"Breen and a gang of his boys are ridin' in," Mackey snapped grimly. "Got Sheriff Carson with 'em. I reckon there's a heap of trouble pilin' up this time!"

Clay Dunn hurled to his feet as if jerked by a string. His chair skidded back across the floor to crash into the wall.

"Breen, huh?" he asked quietly. There was a dangerous quality to his voice, for all its lack of emotion. "If that jigger is as high up in the syndicate as I think he is, I reckon I'm glad to see him again. Let's go, Mackey. Keep yore eyes peeled and play the cards the way Breen throws them."

He stalked through the house and out on the low front porch as the riders reined in and dismounted at the yard gate. They came forward in a knot, a half-dozen of them. Breen was in the lead, walking beside a lean, compact man who wore a sheriff's badge pinned on the front of his shirt.

THEY halted, and Dunn's stare surveyed them coolly. His gaze rested on the sheriff.

"Yuh're Carson, I reckon," he drawled dispassionately.

The lawman nodded curtly.

"I am. And yuh're the hombre who claims to be Clay Dunn."

Dunn smiled thinly.

"Yuh act like there's some doubt in yore mind about it."

The sheriff's mouth was like a trap, his gaze level and keen and piercing.

"There's plenty of doubt in my mind about it," Carson returned bluntly. "First off, I got a wire this mornin' that a killer by the name of Tom Ackers had been seen a few weeks ago headin' this way. You answer his

general description, mister."

"Tom Ackers was buried in town yesterday, Carson," Dunn stated quietly.

"That's the way you make the story," the lawman grunted.

Mounting anger edged Clay Dunn's reply.

"I ain't used to bein' called a liar, Sheriff, so go easy there. I'm Clay Dunn, and yuh can take it that way or leave it."

"Yuh got any proof?"

"Only Beth and Roy Mackey."

"Their word wouldn't be worth a hoot in court. They couldn'ta recognized yuh. Yuh've been away too long. Any papers to identify yuh?"

"I give them all to Tom Ackers."

"Which may be another bunch of hot air," the lawman snorted.

Dunn's frayed temper flared.

"All right, then yuh ain't shore I'm not Tom Ackers! Yuh didn't trot along with Breen's pack to tell me that. What's on yore mind, Carson?"

The sheriff's eyes were like chips of flint, bleak, hard, expressionless.

"This is yore show, Breen," he said. "You tell him."

Dunn's gaze jerked away from the lawman's face to fasten on Jason Breen. He saw smiling mockery on Breen's lips, a glint of truculence in the man's dark eyes. And there was a deadly poise of readiness in the men behind Breen that didn't escape Dunn's searching glance. A nameless premonition struck a warning through him, tensing his muscles, keening his nerves.

"I reckon yuh didn't come here to say good mornin', Breen."

Breen grinned virulently.

"I reckon not. I'll make it short and sweet, mister." The grin vanished. He went on in sudden harshness. "I'm givin' you and Mackey and this gal three days—until Saturday—to pack up yore bags and clear off the Double D."

Clay Dunn's muscles jumped as if he had been struck. He swayed forward, anger and amazement tightening his face. His eyes flashed from Breen to the lawman, then back to Breen. Had these men known him better, the bunching of his jaw muscles would have made them cautious.

"Yuh're doin' what?" he jerked out. "By Judas, yuh got gall, Breen, tryin' to order me off my own ranch! Carson, are you sittin' in on this deal?"

CARSON'S silence was sufficient answer. But mockery edged Jason Breen's truculent voice.

"You ain't got no ranch, feller. Yuh never owned the Double D, and yuh know it!"

"Breen, yuh've spilled a lot," Dunn snapped, his voice a thin, cutting whip. "Yuh better start showin' yore hand, or get ready for some real war."

Breen grinned crookedly, his eyes glinting pools of jet. He slipped one hand into the pocket of his coat, brought out a piece of paper.

"Yuh thought yuh'd found yoreself a good thing, didn't yuh?" he jeered. "Yuh're Ackers, not Dunn. I reckon we'll have proof soon enough. But yuh didn't know I'd closed a deal with the real Clay Dunn for the Double D the day before he was killed. Shore. He couldn't wait to sell out.

"I reckon Dunn didn't let Mackey and the gal in on the deal, judgin' from the way they look. But I bought the Double D with ten thousand dollars of good money, and I got the bill of sale here to prove it. Take a look, if yuh want to see how yuh stand."

Dunn jerked the paper from Breen's hand, shook it open and hastily glanced over it. Numbness struck him. It was a bill of sale to the Double D, and in the lower corner he saw the exact duplicate of his signature. His eyes snapped up, hot and cold at once, and deep lines of anger etched a bracket around his stiff lips.

"So that's the play," he said slowly. His words quickened with the gather-

ing storm of his temper. "This signature looks like mine, but I didn't sign it. Yuh got it from the papers in Tom Ackers' pocket. Yuh forged it, yuh d i r t y, yeller-bellied sidewinder. Yuh're the one who murdered Tom Ackers!"

The chill of Dunn's fury rolled out like an invisible tide to smother Jason Breen. The man's heavy face shaded gray and a flicker of fear crept into his dark eyes. Only Ray Poole seemed untouched, and he looked on, cold, dispassionate, a sneer on his cruel lips.

"Considerin' what a polecat yuh are, Ackers, I reckon that lie comes plumb natural," he said in icy venom.

It was gun bait. Clay Dunn knew it for what it was, and met it with the same deliberation with which it was given. Poole's slender fingers were splayed out just over the butts of his guns, suggestive in their taut quivering. Dunn realized they had to get him out of the way. He had to meet the challenge. His hand flashed out, left the white but quickly reddening imprint of his fingers on Poole's narrow face.

"It's what yuh want, ain't it, killer?" Dunn grated.

Without a word, as if some inner tension had snapped, the gunman's hand slapped down to his holsters.

Clay Dunn's draw came with a flashing leap of blood and hand. The drop and sweep of his guns were almost too swift for vision, and yet the heavy weapons were there, snapping level even as Poole's frantic shot tugged at the sleeve of his shirt. There was a spurting lance of red, a burst of black, the crash of the shot.

Dust rose in a sharp puff from the front of Ray Poole's shirt. Abruptly there was blood, a dark stain at first, then a rapidly widening blot. Poole's feral virulence sustained a violent shock. The callousness left his eyes and was replaced by pain and horror. He rocked slightly on wide-planted

Hack Estes

legs. His mouth worked, as if he struggled for words that wouldn't come. His lips gave forth no sound as he slumped heavily to the ground.

THE dropping of the killer seemed to jar the gunmen around Jason Breen into life. Their hands swooped down, impelled by a single savage purpose, only to jerk to a halt under the menace of Dunn's up-swinging weapons.

"Have a try at it, gents," Dunn invited contemptuously. "Hades ain't full yet, but there's shore enough of yuh to crowd the gates. Estes, yuh got anything in mind?"

A faint smile of cold amusement twisted Hack Estes' thin lips, and his voice came in a chill whisper.

"Only that yuh ain't just lucky. Yuh're plumb good with them irons. You and me will tangle one of these days."

"Don't push yore nerve too far in the future, Estes. Why not now? That was the idea, wasn't it—to get me out of the way?"

Estes' bony shoulders shrugged. Dunn's all-inclusive stare pulled to Breen, and his voice whipped out bleakly.

"Yuh've made yore talk, Breen. Now I'll make mine. Yuh came here with the idea yuh could bluff me off the Double D with that forged bill of sale, and if I wouldn't bluff, Poole was to prod me into a fight. Well, get this in yore noggin here and now. It'll take more than a piece of paper to throw me off this ranch. I may not be able to prove I'm Clay Dunn right now, but I can get proof—all yuh want—jest as soon as I can get mail from here to Arizona and back.

"Until I get them papers, you keep yore ugly face out of my sight. Yuh murdered Tom Ackers so yuh could get them papers of mine he had. Yuh figured yuh could forge a bill of sale and take over the Double D with no kick from the law. Maybe yuh could legally, but I got a heap stronger law here in my hands, and I'll use it again the first time yuh give me a chance!"

CHAPTER IX

Death Asks for More

HEAVY face gray, his hard lips jerking, Jason Breen waited out Dunn's violent outburst. When Dunn had finally finished, he barked a short, harsh laugh.

"That all you got to say?" He didn't wait for an answer. If Dunn had seen evidence of the man's dangerousness before, he could plumb the depths of Breen's festering virulence now. "Yuh can write this down in yore Bible. Yuh was in with this Tom Ackers jigger. Yuh said that yoreself. And if yuh are really Clay Dunn like yuh claim, then yuh was tryin' to string a dirty deal on me. I paid Ackers ten thousand cash for the Double D, and I don't aim to be swindled out of it.

"If yuh're really Dunn, then yuh can start diggin' down in yore jeans and fork over that money. If yuh're Tom Ackers and think yuh can bluff yore way through this, yuh're due for a load of trouble down yore neck. And until yuh prove yuh're Clay Dunn, this here spread is mine. Startin' today, I'm roundin' up all the hosses on the Double D. If yuh try to stop me, yuh'll get what yuh ask for, and some that yuh wasn't expectin'."

Dunn's hot stare jerked to the lawman.

"You backin' him on this, Carson?"

The sheriff's face was a hard, emotionless mask.

"Until yuh prove yuh're Dunn, Breen's actin' within his rights," he declared bluntly.

Dunn laughed savagely. "And in the meantime I'm to be rustled broke, huh? Not while I can fan a gun, yuh coyotes! All right, Breen. This is yore play. But try to drive off any Double D stock and yuh'll get war. Now pack up yore dead pard and clear out."

Silence lowered its foreboding smother over the ranchhouse as the riders moved off. Clay Dunn watched them from the porch steps, face gray and drawn, lean frame quivering and tense under the lash of his anger.

The horsemen halted while still within sight of the house. After a moment one of them angled off alone toward the Mesquite road. The rest, with Jason Breen in the lead, headed toward the Double D boundary line.

"Carson is goin' to town to get his posse lined up," Dunn said. "Breen will round up his men and give 'em their orders. They'll hit us before the day is over."

Behind Dunn, Roy Mackey chuckled

with grim cheerfulness.

"The way yuh read off the scripture to Breen, it's a wonder they ain't after our hides right now," he grunted.

Dunn turned. Mackey's eyes were unreadable, but the line of his jaw spoke of inflexible purpose. Beth looked on from the doorway, white and shaken, deep lights of fear in her eyes. She smiled as Dunn's gaze turned on her, yet a faint tremor shook her lips.

"Clay, when you slapped Poole, I —I thought the whole gang would jump you."

DUNN forced a strained laugh. "I'da been scared, too, if I'da had any sense. But that fight was all cocked and primed, and I was fool enough to set it off."

"Yuh played the fool, all right," Mackey growled. "Yuh couldn'ta picked a quicker way to blow up this end of the Huecos. Breen won't stop now till he's got the Double D nailed to the wall."

A galling flood of bitterness rolled through Dunn.

"And if you and Beth stay around here, they'll throw down on yuh, too. This ain't yore fight, Roy. Take Beth and clear out before it's too late."

Beth shook her head slowly, and her voice was low and level.

"I said I'd be with you in this fight, Clay."

"Yuh can count me in," Mackey spoke up in a sullen tone. "I don't know what we can do against Breen's gun crew, but I been around this outfit too long to walk out now. But I don't reckon we got a chance, even if yuh can prove yuh're Clay Dunn."

Dunn smiled crookedly.

"Yuh still ain't shore about me, are yuh?"

Mackey's reply was grim and blunt.

"I won't be shore of anythin' till I see what the law makes out of this. I'm goin' to town to get that mail out. I'll drop in on Carson while I'm there and see if I can get him to put a halter on Breen."

He turned stiffly to stalk to his saddled horse, mounted. Without a backward glance, he rode off.

Dunn found Beth's eyes on him when he again turned to face the girl.

"What about Carson?" he asked.

"Carson is as straight as day," she answered quietly.

Dunn grinned bitterly.

"Which puts him on Breen's side of the fence. He'll throw his law in with Breen, and by the time I can prove who I am, the Double D will be ruined."

"But what can you do about it?"

Dunn laughed harshly, hands sliding down to the worn butts of his low-sheated Colts.

"There's more than one kind of law," he said thinly.

He turned and strode toward the corral.

* * * * *

INSIDE the Boxed B ranchhouse, Jason Breen paced the floor in long, restless strides. He paused now and then, as if feeling the weight of the silence, turned and let his dark eyes cross the hard faces of his men. His lips were working under the lash of violent emotions as he halted and swung around for the third time.

"Six of the best gun-slingers along the border, and Dunn is still on two legs!"

There was a harsh ring of angered derision in his tone. Across the room, the men shifted uncomfortably. One of them, a short, thin man with high, bony shoulders, spoke up in a crotchety growl.

"Breen, I don't reckon yuh got any call, combin' us down for that job. Yuh said for one of us to take Dunn on, and Poole picked the job. Yuh wouldn't let us all throw in at once."

"And queer ourselves with Carson? What do yuh think I use for brains, Kerry?"

Kerry retorted with thinly veiled rancor.

"Then why jump down our throats because yore plan didn't work out?"

A stiffness came over Jason Breen's big frame, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Kerry, are you buckin' me?"

"I ain't loco. What yuh say goes with me, same as it always has. All I'm kickin' about is being roweled for somethin' that wasn't our fault. It woulda ended the same if any one of us had jumped Dunn. He's plumb greased lightnin' with a gun."

At one side, Hack Estes snorted dryly, the perpetual smile of cold amusement on his hard lips.

"Speak for yoreself when yuh say Dunn can't be beat, Kerry," he declared.

Kerry twisted around in his chair, finding a new channel for his anger.

"Dunn had Poole shaded before he touched leather," he bridled.

Estes hacked out a laugh of icy scorn.

"Poole talked a fast gun, but he never seen the day he could beat me."

"Good, ain't yuh?" Kerry jeered. "I don't recollect hearin' yuh speak up when Breen asked for someone to take on Dunn."

"Poole wanted the chance," Hack Estes said dispassionately. "He got it."

"That shore was mighty generous of yuh, givin' in so easy to make him feel good."

A subtle change came over Hack Estes. There was no movement of muscle, no altering of his smiling lips, but the glint in his eyes spoke of the frigid rage beneath the surface.

"Kerry, yuh're talkin' plumb loose and loud," he said softly.

A tinge of fear struck Kerry's narrow face, but his hot words came unchecked.

"Yuh asked for it."

"Mebbe yuh're honin' to try me out," Hack Estes breathed.

A tense, strained silence fell and gripped the room. Chairs scraped on the bare boards of the floor as men shoved back to open an aisle between Estes and Kerry. Kerry stood up slowly, his breathing suddenly labored, gray streaking his face.

Hack Estes pushed lazily to his feet, and his indolence was a deadly warning in itself. Kerry's voice was hoarse and panting.

"You push me—and I'll take yore play—Estes."

HACK ESTES chuckled icily, but before either man could make a move, Jason Breen's harsh voice boomed out.

"Cool off, you two! If yuh want to see which of yuh is the fastest, throw yore guns where they'll do some good. Clay Dunn is still an open target."

Kerry's drawn lips fell silent.

"I reckon I'll take that job, Breen," Estes said, in cold fury.

Jason Breen strode forward, his heavy jaw rock-hard.

"Then yuh'll wait till I give the say-so," he rapped out. "I'm still boss here, and don't none of yuh forget it. Estes, if yuh got any thoughts to air, spit them out to me."

Hack Estes turned slowly, his demeanor cool. He spoke calmly, without a change of tone.

"Well, Breen, now that yuh brace me about it, I reckon I have got somethin' on my mind. Yuh're boss here, shore, but you ain't the big boss. That's what I don't feel easy about. None of us knows who the big boss is. He gives us the dirty jobs, and he leaves our cut someplace for us to pick up. Why, even you don't know who he is! Yuh get all yore orders through General Delivery."

A dangerous quality crept into Jason Breen's voice.

"You kickin', Estes?"

"No, I ain't kickin'—yet," Estes answered levelly. "I'm jest thinkin'

Clay chopped the loaded butt of the quirt between White Star's ears (Chap. XVII)

what all the rest here would be thinkin', if they had anythin' to use for brains. If the big boss trusted us, he wouldn't be so careful to keep out of sight. How do we know he ain't goin' to throw down on us when we finish this job for him?"

"Talkin' like that ain't a good way to stay healthy, Estes," Jason Breen said, low and bleak. "Yuh ain't figurin' on skipping out, are yuh?"

Estes snorted cynically.

"I reckon not! I don't go halfway when I string in with an outfit. And as long as this Dunn jigger is around, we'd all better worry about our health. A forged bill of sale to the Double D and a law bluff ain't no way to handle that gent. I can put two and two together. The big boss—whoever he is—killed Tom Ackers and used the papers he found on Ackers to forge that bill of sale.

"Any other gent but a tough hombre like Dunn woulda tucked his tail and run, leavin' us in the clear. But Dunn ain't the runnin' kind. It'll take lead, and plenty of it, to knock him out of the way. We'd better get at that job dang quick."

The others nodded agreement.

The stiffness drained from Jason Breen's body, and he turned back to his desk.

"I reckon we'll get our orders soon enough, Estes," he returned grimly. A distance-muffled beat of hoofs became audible, and grew rapidly into a hard clatter. Breen cast a quick glance through the window behind him, then turned, grinning. "Here's Heaver from town now. He musta picked up some hot orders from General Delivery."

The hoofbeats stopped just outside the building, and a moment later a

short, flat-faced man stamped into the room. He tossed a packet of papers on the desk before Breen.

"There they are, Boss, and one of 'em is marked 'rush.' I rode a good hoss into the ground followin' that order."

Lips hard, Breen singled out the rush order and ripped it open. His eyes ran over the message, then jerked up, cold and bright. His voice was harsh and impelling.

"Here's the orders, boys, and we'd better not slip up this time." He paused, and the weight of the silence built into a tangible pattern of deadliness. "We cut loose on the Double D right now! Carson is with us as long as we don't push things too far. Estes, you take the gang and start roundin' up every broke and wild hoss on the Double D. Crease 'em, if you can't get 'em any other way.

"Don't shoot Roy Mackey or Beth. When yuh see 'em, give 'em a scare and run 'em out of the country so they won't come back. If yuh meet up with Dunn, yuh know what to do. And this time see that he's the one that gets planted. Clay Dunn has to go!"

CHAPTER X

Murder Range

RAKING the earth in its glow, the high sun was laying down a barrage of still, dead heat when Clay Dunn saw the first evidence of the fulfillment of Jason Breen's ruthless promise. He was riding around a mesquite-studded hogback at a guarded lope. Somewhere in this direction he had thought he heard the distant sound of shots minutes before. Suddenly his mount halted and shied to one side, almost throwing him.

Dunn's eyes jerked down from the higher slope of the ridge he had been searching. It was then that he saw the bodies of the two horses. Surprise struck him with the first glance. Then came a tide of bitter fury that swept through him like liquid fire.

The horses lay within a few feet of each other. The leveled grasses and torn up sage close by told of the threshing of agonized hoofs before slow-coming death had reached the animals.

There was blood, and it had been the scent of this that had startled his mount. Dunn could see it pooled thick and dark in the dust near the horses' necks. The full meaning came to Dunn with a rush, and he cursed harshly, his lips a white-edged line.

"Creased!" The words came as if they had burst past some constriction in Clay Dunn's throat. "So that's what them shots meant. Blast Jason Breen and his gun-skunks!"

He knew what had brought about the death of the two horses. Creasing was brutal, cruel, but it was the most rapid method of capturing wild and half-wild horses that were too wary to be caught in a quick roundup.

Dunn could reconstruct the situation. Jason Breen had ordered his men to round up the Double D stock. When the Boxed B riders encountered horses that tried to escape, they used their guns, shooting to graze the cords at the top of the neck just enough to stun and knock down the animals. Inevitably, when this method was employed, more horses were killed than were captured. But that risk had to be taken when speed was essential.

Even as the significance of Breen's move drove into Dunn's brain, he heard another distant flurry of shots. He whipped his mount around, sent it plunging up the slope of the hogback,

a hot wave of anger surging through him.

He reined in sharply at the crest of the rise. Here the full sweep and spread of the Double D lay before him. Draws and arroyos cut their jagged pattern into the rolling rangeland of grass and sage and cactus. A few scattered clouds, white and round against the high blue of the sky, scarcely dimmed the glare of the sun. Dunn's eyes narrowed under the brim of his hat.

At first no movement met his shifting gaze. He could see the distance-stunted ranchhouse, with the faint dark lines behind that marked the corrals. Then closer at hand, and to one side, he saw a faint, low-hanging pall of dust. Behind the shifting cloud he made out dim figures that became horses and riders under his intent stare. They were a full mile away. But even at this distance, as a stirring of air thinned the dust, he could see that the horse herd numbered at least a hundred head.

HE knew with grim certainty that once Jason Breen got the horses on the Boxed B, no process of law could make him return them before Clay Dunn was ruined. The issue was unmistakable.

"If I prove who I am," Dunn muttered tensely, "Breen will hang onto them hosses till I go broke and have to sell out. If I try to stop him and his men—I reckon that's jest what the dirty skunk wants."

The dead do not talk. Dunn knew that was the answer. If he were killed trying to drive off the Boxed B riders, there would be no one to testify that the bill of sale Breen held was not genuine.

Hard-lipped, Dunn slanted his horse down the pitch of the hogback. Dust and gravel showered out from under skidding hoofs. As his horse reached the bottom of the slope, he spurred it into a hard run.

A dense, ominous silence seemed to grip the range that even the drumming of his horse's hoofs could not dispel. A stagnant hush through which a tangible threat of violence mounted, it almost had a taste and smell to it.

He held to the low cuts, swinging through sandy arroyos and stone-clogged draws to avoid taking the chance of skylining himself. Then as the distance shortened, he slowed his mount to a trot. At length he reined in tensely behind the cover of an outcrop of granite as the beat of hoofs and the yells of riders reached his ears.

He waited. Trouble was boiling up until it had a palpable shape and structure, and yet it held no strangeness for Clay Dunn. He was ready, poised, coldly weighing his chances and finding them slim.

The Double D, which had known only peace before he had left so many years ago, had become a murder range now, gripped by greed and rocked by the violence of the Colt. Tom Ackers had been killed without a chance for his life. Somehow Clay knew that his father, old Hank Dunn, had fallen into a murder trap. His disappearance could no longer mean anything else.

A lone buzzard wheeled in ceaseless circles in the high blue of the sky, and that seemed grimly significant. In the open space beyond the rocks appeared a lone mustang, branded and yet half-wild. It showed a moment of startled surprise before it fled out of sight. By that alone Dunn knew that Breen's men were not far distant.

Over the mounting rattle of hoofs, he heard a man's high-pitched yell suddenly ring out.

"Get back in there, yuh hammer-headed son of Satan! Kerry, tighten up over there. Lettin' hosses bust through ain't no way to clean out the Double D!"

Anger like a cold flame churned

through Clay Dunn's veins as he stood up in his stirrups to peer over the rocks. The riders were no more than a quarter of a mile away now, and coming forward rapidly. A short, wedge-faced man was heading the herd on Dunn's side, and he guessed this would be Kerry. He let his gaze travel on, eyes narrow and intent.

Hack Estes rode the far side of the herd. The gunny's attention seemed everywhere at once, as if he might be expecting someone. Dunn grinned thinly.

"Maybe yuh'll get company before yuh figure, Mister Estes," he muttered.

DUNN counted the rest of the riders, seven in number, and grimly marked their positions in his mind. Then he sank back into his saddle and drew both guns. His first glance had told him the herd was high-strung and nervous. He knew his abrupt appearance would stampede them in all directions, but after that—Coldly he forced his mind into another channel. What happened after he stampeded the herd depended on his guns and the speed and endurance of his mount.

Every nerve in his body was strained to the snapping point as the herd thundered closer. The yards shortened to feet. He saw Kerry go by. Then, as if some tension had snapped within him, he swung his feet back and raked the flanks of his horse with his spurs. The startled horse squealed, seemed to explode out of the rocks. Dunn's shout rang out, hoarse, vibrant and savage.

"Estes! All yuh gun-skunks! I'm over here, blast yuh!"

There was an unmeasurable instant when bold amazement and surprise gripped the air. The horse herd halted, a quivering, milling knot of trampling hoofs and rolling eyes. Through the instant of silence, Hack Estes' voice sang out.

"Kerry, yuh fool, that's Dunn! Get him!"

Dunn saw the frantic grab of Kerry's hand. He waited a split-second of bleak mockery, then felt his own gun jump in his hand. Kerry seemed hurled back in his saddle by an unseen hand. He caught wildly at the horn, but his nerveless hand missed. His scream of fear and agony sliced through the roaring echoes of Dunn's shot as he fell.

Chaos reigned after that. The horses milled away at the crash of Dunn's shot, wheeled, spun, broke into a stampede as a gun blared from the far side of the herd. Through the thickening haze of dust Dunn saw a gunman whip his mount around before the surging tide of horseflesh. The man's horse jumped, but terror weighted its hoofs. It stumbled. There was a faint, muffled scream that the billowing clouds of dust smothered into silence as quickly as it had come.

Dunn jerked his mount around and sent it into a hard run down a cactus-choked draw. Behind him was noisy confusion, but he knew that only scant seconds would elapse before Hack Estes and his gunmen were on his trail.

The draw thinned out a quarter of a mile farther on, and he struck across a sage-studded flat stretch. He started to swing off at an angle, hoping to be able to circle around the gunmen toward the home buildings. A shot behind him told him that was futile.

He felt the whip of the close-passing slug as he twisted around in his saddle to look behind. The gunmen were fanned out not more than a hundred yards away. His guns bounced and yammered in his hands, but he realized that the slugs were spending themselves uselessly in empty space.

The killers swept on, deadly in their silence as they closed in. Slugs could not hold them off. They'd had their orders, and Dunn knew with

grim certainty that they did not intend to fail this time.

He swung to the front in his saddle, dropping low, and strained his mount into a harder run. His horse had speed, but how long could it keep up the pace? Hot air hammered at Dunn's face as the animal dropped into a shallow arroyo and hurled up the far side.

AHEAD lay the high-flung bulk of the Huecos. A thin smile touched Dunn's hard lips. His time-blurred memory of the mountains was of narrow valleys and rock spreads, where the scrawny growths of cactus and sage seemed sick from thirst, trackless gorges and boulder-choked canyons. Once he entered the wasteland ahead, he could find a dozen places to elude the killers behind him.

He cast a glance over his shoulder. The gunmen were close to half a mile behind him, no longer pressing their mounts. Their calm lack of haste struck a chill of foreboding within Clay Dunn. It was as if they were saving their horses, waiting coldly for the inevitable, grimly confident of the outcome.

A narrow valley opened before him, and Dunn sent his mount plunging along the rocky floor. Here memory failed him, and the premonition of impending disaster became an almost tangible thing that strained his nerves. The slopes on either side of him seemed to steepen with each pounding stride of his horse.

Almost before he was aware of it, he was driving deeper into a granite-walled canyon. A nameless warning jangled across his brain, but it was too late to turn back. A hoarse, exultant yell sounded from behind him. His quick glance showed him the gunmen, spurring their mounts savagely toward him with a wild burst of speed.

Then abruptly he knew that the canyon snaked around a granite shoulder and suddenly became a box can-

Roy Mackey

yon! The swift realization of the trap he had ridden into was like an icy hand closing over him.

All that time, the gun crew behind him had known where his route would take him. Naturally they had waited.

His searching glance flashed over both walls, where they closed in at the head of the canyon. There was no break in them, nothing that would offer escape. But there were boulders footing the cliffs that would offer some protection against the killers.

He swung off sharply toward the north wall, and Hack Estes' high-pitched yell rang out behind him.

"He's tryin' to hole up! Drop that jigger!"

Shots blared. Dunn heard the deathly whisper of passing lead. He twisted around to snap two quick shots that made the lead rider sheer off wildly, throwing confusion into the ranks of the gunmen behind him.

The next instant Dunn was in the boulder field, threading his mount as rapidly as possible through the rocks. He reined in tensely at the canyon wall. Here the overhang of the cliff had shunted off falling stones and boulders, forming a narrow lane that led in either direction.

He started to swing back toward the mouth of the canyon, hoping to double around the gang. He halted the movement as quickly as it had been begun. Hack Estes' guarded voice floated to his ears.

"Take it slow. We'll smoke him out. Seiffert, you and Flagg split and cover both walls. He's bottled in, and I aim to be plumb shore he don't slip out!"

CHAPTER XI

Returned from Death

CLAY DUNN grinned with a bleak lack of humor as he thumbed spent shells from his guns and reloaded the chambers. He knew Estes wasn't overlooking any bets. Thin fingers of bitterness clutched at Dunn's heart. This was the showdown, just as the same fatal moment had come for his father and for Tom Ackers. It could end but one way. He wished with a surge of cold fury that Jason Breen had ridden with the gang. But Breen was playing a safe hand.

Dunn started his horse around the head wall of the canyon. The rocks footing the cliff were thicker here, and he guided his mount through them at a walk. There was no sound to break the smother of silence. The hoofbeats were muffled by the thick dust. There was no sense of movement, or time, or what was coming. Yet through it all Dunn knew that behind, and on either side of him, bleak-eyed killers were closing in.

It seemed strange that he should wonder about Beth Mackey at the moment. How would she take his death? What would become of her and her uncle, when the Double D was taken from them?

The question seemed to mock him, for during all the years he had been away from home, he had wondered about her only with vagrant curiosity. But now there was something oddly personal to it, a feeling that what the next few moments would cost him was something far more important than he had ever expected. He had faced death before, yet the outcome had never meant more than mere survival or oblivion.

A break in the canyon wall caught his eye and he reined his horse to a halt. It was low and hardly more than a dozen feet across, its sides smooth and rounded, as if it had known the wash of some turbulent, long-dead underground river that had burst into the outer world. The bed was naked rock that would show no tracks.

As Dunn forced his mount into the black maw, he heard Hack Estes' tense voice somewhere behind him.

"Close in, yuh gun-slammers! We're gonna make some buzzard bait, if that jigger didn't slip away!"

Dunn halted his horse well back from the mouth of the cave, ready to make his last stand. He could hear the faint sounds of creaking leather and horseshoes scuffing rock, and knew the killers were not far distant.

He waited, still in the saddle, both guns jutting out in his hands. Then he felt a breath of cool, damp air on the back of his neck. A vague thought worked into his brain, abruptly struck fire. That draft of air had come from behind him, not from the opening of the cave!

Could it be that somewhere in the Stygian darkness in back of him the cave had another outlet? Or had that draft of air come from some unplumbed cavern hidden in the void of blackness? Whatever it was, here was a chance!

He swung his horse with a press of his hand and headed it into the dark-

ness. He moved slowly, trusting everything to the sure instinct of his mount. The cavern bent after a few yards, and the blackness became complete. Some primitive fear of the unknown clutched at him like tiny fingers of ice, but he forced it off. The darkness seemed something that lived and breathed, a thing that threatened. Even the faint sounds of hoof on the rock floor were smothered and without meaning.

He sheathed his guns and pressed exploring hands to either side of him. He touched one wall, and it was cold and damp. The thought struck him that this was almost like invading a tomb, riding into the bowels of the earth. The irony of it brought a low chuckle from his lips.

"At least I'm ridin' into it," he muttered, "not waitin' around to be kicked into a grave by a bunch of gun-hungry killers."

AS if by a quirk of his imagination, he thought the blackness had given way to a faint gray. He closed his eyes, not trusting his strained vision. When he opened them a moment later, it was to look into a blinding shaft of sunlight.

His horse had halted at the lip of a hoof-pocked trail that snaked down a steep pitch just beyond the cavern opening. Below him the green of grasses and cottonwoods split by a slender ribbon of water, was a small valley, hardly a quarter of a mile in width and scarcely more than that in length.

Staring, Dunn's first surprise gave way to amazement and wonder. He knew without conscious thought that his father had not known of this hidden valley, nor old Roy Mackey.

Now he understood how the wild horse herd, led by the stallion Mackey had called White Star, had escaped capture for so many years. At the distant end of the canyon he could see them grazing peacefully in the lush grasses along the creek bank. Some chance, perhaps the heritage of the wild itself, had acquainted the wild horses with this unknown canyon. They had made of it a place of refuge.

Dunn's glance traveled around keenly. The walls of the canyon were sheer and unbroken, as if they had been split and parted back through the ages by some gigantic quake of the earth. Limited as his knowledge of such things was, Dunn could guess what must have happened.

This had been a mountain valley, and the creek had coursed in the opposite direction, to cut its way through the wall of rock and form the cavern through which he had passed. Then something had happened within the interior of the earth. The outer crust had buckled and cracked, deepening the valley into a naked walled canyon, and dropping the floor far below its only outlet.

But even as Dunn turned this over in his mind, a more grim, vital thought formed and grew. His father had succeeded in capturing White Star and his *manada* just before he had disappeared. Recapturing the wild horses would be in a small way fulfil his father's last wish. Something less tangible, yet even more grimly haunting was the thought that Tom Ackers had been murdered while trying to break White Star.

A picture formed in Clay Dunn's mind of the piece of Ackers' saddle-blanket Beth had given him, with its cryptic blood-marked lines. He wondered if there could be any hidden proof in that to nail Jason Breen as Ackers' murderer.

Thin-lipped, Dunn nudged his mount down the trail. It was narrow, a snaking switchback that skirted granite ledges and treacherous slopes, where a careless step would end in the chaos of a landslide. He dropped lower, eyes shifting alertly around him. There was no sound to break the

silence. It was as if he invaded a land that had been forgotten by man, and the hush and press of the sun's still, dead heat were tangible of warning.

He reached the foot of the slope, paused briefly, disturbed by a presentiment he couldn't name. Then he moved on slowly toward the horses at the far end of the canyon. The trail threaded through a growth of cottonwoods and into a scatter of boulders. He had expected the silence to give forth some sound to warn him. But he was caught off guard when a voice jarred out from behind him.

"Reach, mister!"

THE convulsive tug of his hand on the reins halted Dunn's horse. There was no move of muscles along his lean frame, yet every fiber within him went rock-hard. Gray leaped out along his jaw and the glint of light on ice jumped into his eyes.

He wasn't the first in this hidden canyon! The realization flared across his brain like streaks of fire. It could mean but one thing—Jason Breen had discovered this canyon on Double D land and for some reason wanted it.

This was the reason behind the murdering of old Hank Dunn and Tom Ackers. The hidden canyon, or what it held was the motive for the syndicate's ruthlessness.

"I said *reach,* blast yuh!"

Every muscle in Clay Dunn's body exploded into violent action. He threw himself wildly from the back of his horse, feet kicking against the saddle to send him in a headlong dive toward the cover of the rocks and drive the mount from danger.

In midair he heard the roar of a gun, felt the swift burn of lead across his shoulder. He struck the ground in a twisting roll, but his dive carried him short of the protecting rocks. He lurched to his knees, both hands stabbing down to holstered guns.

He caught a flashing glimpse of a gaunt, stooped figure in the trail behind his horse, a drawn, gray face, battered clothes, thin whisps of snow-white hair. A man with bleary, feverish eyes, and lips that were twisted into a snarl of savagery, held two guns that even now were swiveling for a second shot.

An ice-cold flood seemed suddenly undammed within Clay Dunn. His guns were drawn, leveled, but every muscle in his body seemed numb. Words screamed across his brain, then burst past the lump in his throat, hoarse and strained.

"Dad! Yuh're still alive! Dad!"

Stunned by the sudden change of events, Clay Dunn stared at his father. The passing of years had filed weight from old Hank Dunn's big frame. His hair had thinned and whitened, but none of the hard lines of his jaw had softened.

There were strange, almost wistful lights in Hank Dunn's sun-faded blue eyes as he stood before his son. His lips worked as he struggled against some powerful inner emotion. Although the first whiteness had left his face, the gray held. His voice was hoarse and faltering, repeating his words, as if even yet he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Clay! After all these years, yuh've come back!"

BITTERNESS and self-condemnation surged through Clay Dunn. He didn't say anything. He felt this moment as if he were powerless to speak.

But his grip on his father's hand spoke worlds. Hank Dunn's gray lips smiled faintly.

"Yuh thought I was dead. Roy or Beth wrote yuh. That's why yuh come back."

"It wasn't jest that, Dad." Clay Dunn fought to keep his voice steady. "I left home to see everythin' there was to see, but I got tired of that after awhile. I'd wanted to come home for

a long time, but I reckon I was jest too stubborn."

The bitterness left Hank Dunn's smile.

"I figgered it was like that. And if this hadn't happened, yuh'da come back soon, anyway."

Clay nodded. He searched his father's face, saw the hollowness and faint flush of his cheeks, the feverish lights in his eyes.

"Dad, yuh're sick!"

The oldster shook his head and chuckled grimly.

"Not now, I ain't. I'm gettin' over it. But up till a week ago, I didn't care a heap what happened to me. A slug busted my leg and I lost a lot of blood."

Clay Dunn's eyes dropped quickly, and the oldster grinned.

"That leg is all right now, even if the rest of me ain't healed up yet. I jest can remember whittlin' out some splints and settin' it before I passed out. I don't know much what happened after that, except wakin' up once in awhile to crawl to the crick for a drink."

CHAPTER XII

Dialogue of the Ex-dead

YOUNG DUNN dropped down on a rock and watched his father seat himself. For a moment silence built up between them. Then Clay spoke quietly.

"When I got here, Mackey hadn't found a sign of yuh. He reckoned yuh'd caught that white stallion yuh'd been after, had been throwed trying to break it and dragged off somewhere. But yuh said yuh been shot. What really happened?"

A chill, brooding light kindled in Hank Dunn's faded eyes as he replied.

"Mackey was right about me catchin' White Star," he said slowly. "And I was tryin' to break that devil, but that ain't what put me here. I reckon the only way to find out what's happened since then is to tell what happened to me first."

He paused, his face going harsh and hard, as if it had been crossed by a shadow.

"I caught White Star in a trap I had over on Yucca Creek, and was strappin' a saddle on him when a bunch of Boxed B gents rode up. They was all masked, but that's who they were, all right, even if Breen wasn't there. Anyway, they throwed their guns and got rough right off. The one who was actin' boss swore I was goin' to sign the Double D over to the syndicate. Jest like that, and they had the papers all made out and ready! I told 'em where to go, and the boss of the outfit started toward me.

"He said he'd beat me to death if I didn't sign. I reckon he shore meant it, only he got too close to White Star's head when he closed in on me. That hoss shore is a devil. He tried hard to bite the gent that was comin' in on me, but only knocked his hat off. That dropped the hombre's mask, and showed he was one of Breen's gun-slicks, Ben Slade!"

"Slade!" Clay Dunn broke in. "Tall gent, narrow, sloped shoulders, right eye half-shut all the time?"

Old Hank Dunn stiffened visibly.

"That's Slade," he snapped. "Fastest gun on the border, except mebbe Hack Estes, or Jason Breen. So you've already met up with him!"

Clay barked a short, harsh laugh. The entire satanic plot was forming over his brain now, detail by detail, laying before him the inflexible greed and ruthless will of the man who bossed the wild horse syndicate.

"I shore have," he said thinly. "Then what happened?"

"When I seen Ben Slade's face, I knowed I didn't have no more chance than a wax doll in Hades. Slade had to shut me up for good to save his own neck, and that's what he started out to do. He jerked his gun up, but by then White Star had got scared again. He pitched jest as Slade was set to shoot and knocked him down. That give me a chance and I took it. I piled into the saddle I'd been strapping on White Star, and that devil hoss took off over my trap gate like he had wings.

"There was a lot of shootin', and that's when I caught that slug in my leg. I got weak fast, and that ride didn't help none. There's nothin' on four legs that can beat that white stallion. Anyhow, I began to get dizzy, then everything started to go black. I don't know when I fell off that hoss. When I woke up, I was in here."

"But there's no saddle on White Star now," Clay said.

"I reckon not!" the oldster grunted. "It's half way across the canyon, with the cinch straps busted. He tore it off somehow."

SILENCE fell, and Clay Dunn's mind raced, sorting facts, seeing the entirety of the syndicate's scheme. Then again he heard his father's grim voice.

"Suppose you tell me some things, son."

Clay spoke quietly, telling everything from the time he had received Beth Mackey's letter urging him to come home. Hank Dunn sat through it all wordlessly, with only the twitching of his hard lips hinting the ire that was mounting within him. When Clay had finished, the old man's voice was murderous.

"So that's how Breen got rid of Slade. Well, I figgered it would be something like that. He didn't know but what I got out of that ruckus alive. If I showed up, he didn't want no proof against him. But how this Ackers' gent beat Slade to the gun gets me."

Clay Dunn laughed with a cold lack of humor.

"Slade wasn't packing a gun. That's why. Breen musta been keeping a tab on me and figgered on gettin' Slade and me out of the way at the same time. Ackers was jest part of the trap built up to outlaw me."

"How?"

"Ackers killed Slade when he thought the killer was goin' for his gun. Only Slade didn't have a gun, and that made it murder. Breen knew I'd help Ackers, so that put the law after me, too. He figgered I'd be out of the way, even if yuh did show up again mebbe."

"Then what about Breen killin' this here Tom Ackers?" Hank Dunn demanded.

"I ain't shore it was Breen who done that job," Clay said softly.

Hank Dunn's lips planed into a thin, hard line and there was a chill in his intent stare.

"Who else coulda done it?" he growled. "He had to use them papers you give Ackers to forge that bill of sale."

"Breen didn't need that bill of sale, dad." The oldster stiffened visibly, a frown pinching his brow. He said nothing, and Clay went on quietly. 'The syndicate had the Double D hammered down to the last notch. You know that as well as I do. Yuh coulda strung 'em along another couple months, mebbe, but yuh couldn'ta done no good, what with the syndicate blockin' all the markets. All they had to do was wait.

"It's a shore thing it won't be more than three or four weeks before we're at war with Spain. That means the Army will need hosses. The syndicate coulda closed in on yuh and made plumb shore their bid was the only one that went to Washington. The Double D was bottled up and corked,

and whoever runs the syndicate knew it."

"Whoever runs it? Yuh mean Breen?"

"I reckon I wasn't thinkin' of him."

"Then who, son? What makes yuh think Breen ain't the head of that syndicate outfit?"

CLAY DUNN shrugged his wide shoulders, a cold, thoughtful glitter in his eye.

"I don't know who," he said slowly. "But if Breen was smart enough to build up the syndicate, I figger he'd be smart enough to look after his own neck. Like I said, he coulda got the Double D, anyway, by waiting a couple months. He didn't need that bill of sale. Showin' up with that forged paper after Ackers' death practically points him out as the murderer.

"It's a bet Sheriff Carson got the idea. The only thing that saved Breen is that I gotta prove I'm Clay Dunn so I can prove that bill of sale had been forged. If Breen was head of the syndicate, he'd be too smart to let hisself in for somethin' like that. That's why he's got his gun-slammers after me. He knows he's in a hole."

Old Hank Dunn's worn hands clenched, knuckles going white.

"Then why this whole set-up?" he asked.

A faint smile touched Clay Dunn's lips.

"Mebbe the boss of the syndicate don't want to split up the pile he's goin' to make."

The statement fell cold and flat upon the silence, and its grim significance built up swiftly, striking conviction in the oldster's weathered face. Hank Dunn cursed, low and harsh.

"The doublecrossin' polecat!" He paused, as if fighting a tide of bitter fury. "Yuh got any idea who this jigger is?"

Clay shook his head.

"The way he's covered his tracks,

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mebbe we won't never know," he stated grimly. "It's a cinch Breen and his men don't know, or their boss wouldn't try to frame them out of the way."

"And in the meantime Breen will try to steal every chance we got to come out of this!" Hank Dunn snorted explosively. "He showed that, makin' his drive on our range stock today. Yuh busted up that play, but that won't stop him. He'll make a try for them thoroughbreds I had in the east corral next."

Clay Dunn hurled to his feet, every muscle in his body suddenly taut. He glanced up at the sky, lips drawing into a thin, sinister line.

A ruddy flush, low over the west wall of the canyon, reminded of the sun that had already dropped below the ragged horizon. The eastern sky was beginning to gather the purple of dusk. In the lower valleys, he knew, the shadows of evening would be deepening into the murk of dusk and the darkness of night wasn't far distant. His eyes jerked down to his father's drawn face.

"I'd forgot all about them hosses," he said, quick and low. "Breen will make a play for them tonight shore. Mebbe I still got time if I hustle."

Hank Dunn stood up, the flush of fever high in his sunken cheeks.

"Yore hoss will carry double, son. I'm goin' with you."

"Yuh can't!" Clay burst out. "Yuh're too weak for that long a ride. And if Breen left guards outside, neither of us could get through."

Deep lines of concern stamped themselves in the oldster's gray face.

"But, son, that leaves you and Mackey buckin' that outfit alone. Yuh won't have a chance next time. Breen will make shore of that."

Clay Dunn chuckled bleakly.

"That'll be Breen's idea. Mebbe I'll have a few on the subject myself."

He turned then. Without a backward glance, he swung into the saddle and sent his horse plunging down the trail at a hard run.

NIGHT had lowered its mantle of darkness over the range when Clay Dunn rode out of the cavern. He held his mount to a walk, impatient at the delay this forced caution cost him. Then, as the mouth of the box canyon fell behind him, he sent his horse through the gloom at a distance-eating lope.

Unfamiliar as he was with this part of the range, he had to halt frequently to make sure of his directions. At best he knew he could not be quite certain of the exact location of the ranchhouse. He had merely an idea of the general direction.

His nerves grew strained and taut as the minutes moved on and became an hour. Small nocturnal noises lifted and fell against the smother of black silence. A scimitar moon rose after a time through the star fields above the earthly darkness. He felt strangely remote, had to fight back the bitter sense of futility that clouded over him.

Even if he succeeded in the almost hopeless task of blocking Jason Breen's move, what chance would he, or his father, or the Double D have, if the head of the syndicate went untouched? And then he thought of Beth Mackey and the firm line of her small chin when she had said his fight would be her fight. An inflexible grimness settled over him again.

He held to the high spots to avoid the tangled maze of draws and arroyos. As he topped one rocky crest, he halted his mount. His eyes carefully swept the depthless black before him. Here there was no sense of distance, until he saw the faint winking lights of the ranchhouse still far to the east of him. After that he urged his mount to a more rapid pace.

The splintered moon was soaring high among the pinhead stars when Clay Dunn again halted his horse, his

every sense constantly keen and alert. His head turned to one side, straining to pick up the faintest noise. Again he heard muffled sounds that were foreign to those of the night. The dull rattle of hoofs on hard-packed earth meant horses were coming. He caught the yet indistinguishable voices of riders.

A chill coursed the length of Clay Dunn's spine. He swung his mount quickly to force it into a clump of mesquite. He halted, waiting tensely, hand over the muzzle of the bay to prevent it from giving out any challenging whicker.

The sound of hoofbeats faded, then came again, closer and more distinct this time. Low, harsh words floated to Dunn's ears.

"Bear off more. Yuh want to let Mackey or that gal know we're out here?"

That voice was strangely familiar, haunting Dunn even after it had drifted into silence. Had it been Breen's? He wasn't sure. It had seemed muffled, as if by a mask, its tone unnatural. And yet something told him that this was the voice of the syndicate boss.

CHAPTER XIII

Night Riders

SAVAGELY a glow of heat churned through Clay Dunn's veins. His right hand dropped to the butt of his holstered Colt, but he didn't draw. Cold reason warned him not to. Even if he had been inclined to fire without warning, he knew the darkness prevented the use of his guns with any degree of accuracy.

Then the darkness gave forth a knot of shadowy riders who drove a small herd of horses before them. Clay Dunn leaned forward, eyes straining to pierce the gloom, puzzled by this strange move. They were Boxed B horses driven by Boxed B riders. Of that he was certain. Just then he heard Hack Estes' dry-toned voice.

"Boss, I'd feel a heap more comfortable about this job if I knowed where that Tramp Dunn jigger is. That gent has a way of makin' himself too rough to fool around with."

Again the oddly familiar voice of the syndicate boss floated to Clay Dunn's ears. This time he saw the man, a robed figure of uncertain size in the black shadows of night. He passed within a dozen yards of Dunn, giving a faint view of a masked face and a low-pulled hat. His voice came in a truculent growl.

"I'll do the worryin', Estes. Yore job is to foller orders. Push these broomtails up a notch. We ain't got all night."

The man rode well to one side of the others. There was an air of feral savagery about him that was apparent in spite of the shrouding gloom of the night.

The riders pushed the herd into a more rapid pace. As they melted into the darkness, Dunn led his horse out of the mesquite clump.

He followed cautiously after them, every nerve strained to catch the least warning of danger. Here, where the higher range sloped down to the small grassy basin in which the Double D's east corral stood, even the faint light of moon and stars seemed lost in the earthly darkness. There was an ominous, unnatural quality in the sounds that floated to him from the horsemen ahead.

He struck off at an angle as he neared the corral. Then he halted in a shallow draw, slipped from saddle and crept forward on foot. Somewhere ahead he heard the rattle and thud of

corral rails being dropped, then the harsh growl of the syndicate leader's voice.

"Rustle, hang yuh! Shove them broomtails in the corral and throw them rails back in place."

So that was the play! The full meaning of it flashed across Clay Dunn's brain like livid flame. The syndicate leader wasn't content with the stealing of the Double D's prize thoroughbreds. He was driving some of Breen's stock into the corral to frame the Double D!

A surge of bitter anger drove through Dunn. With a low oath he jerked his guns, started grimly forward, only to halt again as the futility of such a move struck him. Alone he had no chance against the syndicate killers, but as long as he kept out of sight there was a chance of doing something.

HE wondered where Roy Mackey was at this moment, and was gripped by a quick impulse to ride for the Double D foreman. Then that thought was jarred from his mind as he heard the syndicate boss' harsh oath.

"I told Breen in that message to send me enough men for this job!"

Hack Estes spoke up in a dispassionate drawl.

"Well, he sent all he had without comin' hisself. The rest of the boys are out huntin' for Dunn. We drove twenty-five head here. I reckon we can drive the same number of Double D hosses back with us."

"Yuh can't. Them thoroughbreds would bust away from yuh before yuh got a mile from here!"

"We can try, Boss."

"Not as long as I'm givin' the orders," the syndicate leader snapped back. "Now shut up and get this straight, Estes. You and the rest hustle back and hunt up the rest of the men. Then come back here and get these Double D hosses. I'll leave my handkerchief around one of these rails so yuh won't make a mistake and pick the wrong corral. Now get goin'. If yuh slip up this time, someone will pay hard!"

Minutes after empty silence had again claimed the night, Clay Dunn stood there, a faint smile spreading across his hard lips. Satisfied that none of the riders had remained behind, he chuckled in bleak softness and started grimly toward the corral.

Some time later, when he turned back from the corral toward his horse, a chill glint lurked in the depths of his narrowed eyes. For on the morrow he knew that war in all its fury would burst loose over the Double D range.

Dawn broke with the flush of red coloring the eastern sky. Clay Dunn rose and, after dressing, went out into the kitchen to find Beth Mackey busy at the stove. She heard him come into the room, and began speaking before she turned.

"Uncle, did you find any—"

She broke off after turning.

Clay saw anxiety flee before surprise and relief as she saw him, and a quick warm glow swept through him.

"Clay!" she cried. "You're back! I was afraid—" She halted. "But when did you arrive? I thought I heard Uncle Roy come in, but not you."

Dunn smiled. "It was late and I didn't want to wake yuh. Where is Roy?"

Understanding came to the girl, and a look of alarm crept into her wide eyes.

"Then it must have been you I heard last night, instead of Uncle Roy. He hasn't come home. He was out looking for you, Clay."

A chill thought drove into Clay's brain. Some revealing expression must have reached his face, for terror leaped into the girl's quick cry.

"Clay, do you think anything could have happened to him?"

CLAY'S grim answer came without conscious volition.

"If he ran into Jason Breen's gunslingers, it's a shore bet somethin's happened."

Even as he spoke the dread words, he wished he could have taken them back. The fear that flooded into her eyes cut him like a thin blade. He hadn't meant to add more worry to her by relating the events of the day before.

"Then you had trouble with Breen's men yesterday," she said slowly, as if groping for words. "Somehow I knew."

He nodded and offered nothing, hoping she wouldn't ask. But she did.

"What was it, Clay?"

His lips stiffened, and he tried to avoid her searching glance.

"It wasn't anythin' much. Beth, yuh've been worried too much about the troubles of the Double D. I didn't mean to tell yuh anythin' to make yuh feel worse."

A flush of anger mounted in the girl's cheeks.

"You came here and could have been Clay Dunn or Tom Ackers, the outlaw, for all I knew. You didn't offer any conclusive proof of your identity. But you asked me to trust you, and I did. Now, because something has happened, you won't confide in me!"

Defensive as her pride was, it irritated Dunn. He couldn't hide the sharp edge of bitterness that came to his reply.

"So all the while yuh haven't really believed in me."

Her voice was remote with a faint note of longing.

"I've tried to, but you aren't helping any by keeping things from me. I may be a woman, but I'm no coward."

"I never figgered yuh as a coward, Beth," Clay said stiffly.

He started to turn away, thinking that in the distance he had heard the low drumming of hoofs. But she came

Hank Dunn

forward quickly and caught at his hands. Pride, humiliation, resentment, a deep appeal crossed her face like shadows, and her voice was low and weary.

"I'm sorry, Clay. I didn't mean everything I said, but I've been worried about you. Now it's Uncle Roy. Can't you understand? Keeping things away from me is hurting more than if you told me."

He hesitated, torn by the plea in her eyes. Then gradually the stiffness left him, and a smile softened his hard lips.

"I reckon I should be apologizin', Beth," he said quietly. "I didn't look at it that way. I was only tryin' to protect yuh. And what good I have I wanted to save as a surprise. All right, I'll tell yuh."

He paused. As he started to speak again, the sound of hoofbeats came clear and distinct through the instant of silence. The girl heard the sound, too, and fear became a living thing in her eyes.

"Clay, someone is coming!" She

spun away like a startled bird to flash a glance out the kitchen window, then whirled back to him. "It's Sheriff Carson. Jason Breen is with him, and all his men. Clay, something is going to happen!"

THE chill of ice settled in Dunn's eyes and his grin was bleak and without humor.

"I reckon plenty is goin' to happen," he said icily. "Beth, promise me one thing. Stay out of sight. This may end in trouble."

She nodded, gray striking her face, and he heard her strained: "Clay, be careful!" as he turned and stalked through the house to the front porch.

Sheriff Carson, Jason Breen and half a dozen cold-eyed gunmen were striding purposefully toward the house when Dunn halted at the edge of the porch. They pulled up sharply at the sight of him, and there was deadliness in the quick fanning out of Breen's men. Dunn's narrowed glance flashed over them, reading savage jubilation in the faces of the gunmen, sensing the hard-held ire of the lawman.

Jason Breen was the first to break the smother of silence, and his voice came in a harsh explosion.

"He shore's got brass! Look at him, Carson, standin' there like he don't know what this is all about!"

Dunn's glance turned to the lawman, at the same time taking in every move of Breen and his men. Carson's face was a hard mask.

"Dunn, when I was here yesterday, I give yuh the benefit of the doubt," he stated with blunt truculence. "I tried to believe yuh was who yuh claimed. But I'll be skinned if I figgered yuh'd show yore hand so soon."

Dunn's smile was void of any vein of humor.

"What are yuh drivin' at, Carson?" he asked coldly.

It was Jason Breen who answered, his voice vicious.

"Yuh know what he's drivin' at, you blasted hoss-thief! Yuh can't bluff yore way out of this."

"Hoss-thief!" Scorn and contempt throbbed in Clay Dunn's harsh outburst. "After the deal yuh tried to pull on me yesterday, you got the gall to call me that? Whether yuh know it or not, yuh're on thin ice, Breen. All right, yuh've spilled yore lip. Now back it up!"

A faint shade of gray spread across Jason Breen's face, but his composure remained unshaken. The man's ferocious effrontery itself betrayed the inflexible savagery of him. Breen's snarling laugh was a bark of fierce derision.

"What happened yesterday was legal," he flung back defiantly. "This spread and everythin' on it belongs to me, and yuh know it. If yuh think you and yore slick guns can scare me off, yuh're crazy. Yuh showed yore stripe yesterday, when yuh drove off my boys after killin' Tim Kerry and Bay Thoman. But yuh topped off yore game when yuh rustled twenty-five head of my hosses last night!"

"Yuh're a dirty liar, Breen," Clay Dunn said with deadly softness.

CHAPTER XIV

Backlash

JASON BREEN'S big frame jerked as if he had been struck. His hands started viciously toward his guns, only to be halted by the sheriff's quick command.

"Cut it, Breen! Dunn, if yuh want a fight, yuh'll get plenty of it from me. What Breen says is true. I seen tracks this morning, where a bunch of his stock had been driven

out of his corral and here to the Double D. If yuh did the job, I'll soon enough find out."

Dunn grinned coldly without taking his eyes from Breen.

"Mebbe yuh'd like to look around, Sheriff," he invited with faint mockery.

"That's jest what I aim to do," the lawman snapped back. "We follered them tracks to within a mile of here, and we're pickin' them up again to see jest where they lead. Go get yore hoss, Dunn, or whatever yore name is, and don't try anythin' funny. I'll be right behind yuh to take up any lead yuh make."

The ride to the east corral was one of foreboding silence. Even the plod of hoofs, the creak of saddle leather and the little metallic jingle of spurs seemed to add to the tension. Trouble boiled up until it enveloped them in a sinister mantle. There was a deadly promise in the ever-watchful eyes of the gunmen.

Jason Breen rode slightly ahead. His ruthless confidence brought an icy glitter to Clay Dunn's eyes. Dunn wondered what the next few moments would bring. Certainly violence, and perhaps swift-striking death. At best he was making a wild, reckless play. And yet there was a measure of hope in it, a chance that in one quick blow he could break the power of the syndicate.

Jason Breen reined in near the corrals, casting no more than a cursory glance at the horses within the enclosure. He swung his mount to face Dunn, hard lips sneering, and triumph throbbed in his harsh voice.

"Them tracks led here just like I figgered, Carson," he grated. "I reckon yuh don't need any more proof how this jigger stacks up. He's a hoss-thief, and that's enough to hang him."

Clay Dunn's slow smile was sharp with contempt and cold mockery.

"Yuh're a fool, Breen," he said.

Breen's face burned a dark red, and a strange glint of doubt crept into his eyes. He half-turned in his saddle, then caught himself and laughed in bleak derision.

"I've seen gall in my time, but never yore brand. Yuh got a hang-rope around yore neck, and still yuh think yuh can brass yore way out of it."

"Yuh fool, yuh've played along with the syndicate, thinkin' yuh'd be paid high for yore dirty work," Dunn gritted. "Don't yuh know when yuh're through? Don't yuh know when yuh've been doublecrossed?"

Jason Breen flinched visibly.

"Dunn — blast yuh — I don't know what yuh're drivin' at!" he broke out hoarsely. A stain of gray crept through his red face. He leaned forward, pushing his hat back with a quivering hand, showing his hard-pinched face beaded with sweat. "What are yuh tryin' to say?"

"Don't yuh know yet?" Dunn shot back tauntingly.

"Spit it out, curse yuh!" the big man shouted, his voice gathering venom. "Yuh've made yore talk—too blasted much of it—about me. I'm not in that syndicate, and never was. Well, I'm calling yore hand here and now!"

DUNN could feel the lawman's watchful eyes on him, the deadly alertness in the stares of Breen's gunmen. But he took the chance. His lean form sank perceptibly, but even more significant were his hands, splayed out just above the butts of his heavy guns.

"Yuh thought yuh had me nailed to the wall, didn't yuh?" he continued scornfully. "Yuh thought yuh had me where yuh wanted me, when yore syndicate boss ordered that rustlin' frame-up put on me. Yuh fool, that frame he built up was put on you! Take a good look in the corral, Breen. That ain't Boxed B stock. Them

hosses wear my brand!"

But Jason Breen didn't turn. He seemed to know, and was readying himself to meet the issue. His face turned a dirty white, and the quivering that ran over his big frame told of the inward lash of violent emotions.

But Hack Estes turned to cast a swift glance toward the corral. When he swung back, his thin smile was a threat in itself. His words came in a dispassionate whisper.

"They're Double D hosses, Breen. It was dark last—"

He got no further. Jason Breen swung around to Dunn.

"So that's the way it is!" he flamed. "Yuh snake-bellied polecat, you rustled my hosses, then drove them back just to bring this on. Yuh knew yuh wouldn't have a chance if Carson kept after yuh. Yuh wanted to swing him against me to protect yore own hide. Yuh're not Tramp Dunn, and I reckon this dirty deal is enough to prove it. Sheriff, are those Double D hosses in there?"

The lawman turned toward the corral, and Dunn knew the moment had come. Uncertainty ceased for Breen. He read the issue as the lawman turned away and drew a long, deep, whistling breath.

As if something had snapped within him, blood and arm and voice exploded simultaneously.

"Look out! He's goin' for his gun! Drill him, men!"

A killer swayed into the clear from behind Breen, his gun already half-drawn and swinging level as the hands of the others flashed holsterward. The movement of Clay Dunn's hand was scarcely visible. But there his guns were, flashing up like living things.

There was a burst of black, spouting red, a roar. The gunman behind Breen seemed to be lifted bodily from his saddle. His Colt exploded at the jerk of convulsive fingers, then spilled from numbed fingers as his horse plunged away.

A small wind seemed to puff at Dunn's shirt. Then he felt a seering stab of pain high in his shoulder. Lead whispered through the air about him like unseen devils as he threw himself headlong out of the saddle. He struck the ground in a twisting roll, then hurled frantically to his feet. He was aware that he was firing only by the bounce of the guns inside his fists.

Through the swirl of powder-smoke before his eyes, he saw a man sway backward under the shock of lead, then fall heavily to the ground. Another screamed, dropped his guns and clutched at a shattered arm.

Only the pitching of the gunmen's horses saved Dunn at that moment. Lead searched for him savagely, spurted dust at his feet, whipped the air around him. But he knew he could not much longer escape the deadly fury of the killers. He started to leap to one side, hoping for a clear shot at Breen.

The jab of something cold and unmoving against his back halted him. Close behind him he heard the sheriff's ringing yell.

"Breen, Estes—put up them guns, all of yuh! I've got this devil and he'll swing high for this job!"

THE guns silenced, but the tension did not slacken. Murder-lust flamed in the eyes of the killers, and for a moment Dunn thought Breen would shoot in spite of the sheriff's orders. Then slowly the big man relaxed and a grin spread across his hard lips.

"Thought he could blast his way out of this by forcin' a fight and blamin' it on us," he growled. "Kordey is shot up, but Reeves and Blain are dead. Sheriff, if he don't hang for this, I reckon this is one time we'll make our own law."

"Play around with that idea long

and it'll get yuh in trouble, too, Breen." Carson's gun prodded deeper into Dunn's back. "I said drop them cutters, killer. We got a place for skunks like you, and yuh're goin' there fast!"

As Dunn loosened his grip on his guns, another voice broke out, low and strained.

"You'd better drop your guns, Sheriff. I've never shot a man yet, but I will if you make me."

A tide of liquid flame seemed suddenly loosened within Clay Dunn. For as the sheriff's gun fell away from

his back, the realization came to him that the voice he had heard belonged to Beth Mackey!

The silence that had fallen at Beth Mackey's command was filled with menace and festering violence. Dunn saw the eyes of Breen and his men jerk around, startled. Then, as one man, their hands began sinking back to their guns.

"Don't try it, Breen!" the girl called sharply. "There are bluewhistlers in this shotgun, and you're not fast enough to beat them. Sheriff, drop them!"

Clay heard the thud of the lawman's guns falling to the ground, then the hoarse outburst of Carson's voice.

"Miss Beth, have yuh gone loco? This man yuh're sidin' is a killer! He started the fight here, and yuh're helpin' him get away. Use reason, ma'am—"

"I'm using reason, Sheriff," Beth broke in wearily. "Two gun barrels of the only kind of reason that seems to get across around here. I don't know who started the fight, but I do know one thing. I trust Clay Dunn enough to see him through in this."

"This man is wanted by the law," Carson croaked. "Helpin' him this way will put yuh in the same class."

"It shore took yuh a long time to see through it, Carson!" Jason Breen flared harshly. "She knows all the Dunns are dead, so she's tryin' to help this owlhooter take over the Double D. This little—"

"Shut up, Breen!"

Jason Breen's heavy face drained to the gray of ash at Dunn's piercing command. Naked fear struck his eyes as he fathomed the fury in the sweep of Dunn's weapons. Dunn was like a man gone wild, lips thinned and curled, raw violence in every line of his body. And yet his voice was cold and deliberate, and he was all the more dangerous because of his calm.

"Breen, that makes it twice yuh've run off at the tongue about Miss Beth," he stated icily. "Let that happen again and yuh'll never live to speak another word. Now one at a time, polecats, shuck them guns. Breen, yuh're first!"

BREEN'S hands trembled slightly as they lowered to unbuckle his belt. When the weapons fell, Dunn's guns swerved suggestively toward the next in line.

"You, ugly, and don't be bashful."

One by one the gunmen unbuckled their belts and let the sheathed weapons fall to the ground. Hack Estes, his perpetual smile transformed into a sneer, was narrowly watchful to the last. But he made no sudden move as he dropped his guns.

"Now slip out of your leather and get over there by the corral," Dunn ordered.

Slowly the killers moved back from their guns, bald virulence in their stares. Dunn's right Colt swung grimly. He didn't like to do this, but cold reason warned him against taking further chances.

His gun crashed, burning a slug across the flank of one of the horses. The horse pitched, squealing in pain, sent the others stampeding wildly away from the corral.

Dunn sheathed his left gun then, stooped to pick up the lawman's weapons, then backed away. For the first time he caught view of the girl behind him. He thought she had never looked so lovely, her small face pale and shaken.

Her lips were trembling slightly, yet determined. She smiled as he moved toward her.

"I — guess I broke my promise, Clay," she said shakily.

Dunn chuckled, and there was warmth in the sound.

"If you hadn't, I reckon I'd been put out of the way for good this time," he said quietly.

Pride put a flush in her pale cheeks as she handed him the shotgun. He sheathed his gun, then thrust the lawman's weapons under his belt. His eyes left her and fixed on Carson.

"I don't blame yuh much for throwin' down on me, Carson. Breen worked that play pretty slick, and I'd be dead now if he'd had his way. But he's run his cards out this time and I'm taking over. I'm showin' yuh how this whole rotten mess stacks up. Get yore hoss."

He never finished. Something warned him, the leap of the lawman's eyes, a sound behind him that was too faint to have meaning. He started to spin, was stopped by the voice that jarred out harshly.

"Drop that shotgun, killer!" Roy Mackey snarled. "If anyone has played his hand out, it's you. Yuh Judas, I'll see yuh hang for what yuh tried to pull off!"

CHAPTER XV

Reversal

EVERY muscle in Clay Dunn's body froze as he saw the stocky Double D foreman come alertly around from one side. Truculence was in Mackey's stare, menace in his leveled guns. Beth cried out in sudden fear.

"Uncle, you don't know what you're doing!"

Mackey barked a short, savage laugh.

"I know plumb well what I'm doin'! Get back, Beth! I looked all over for this dirty skunk, and when I couldn't find him, I went to town to look. He wasn't there, but I found somethin' a sight more important. I found a 'wanted' poster that tallies all the way with this skunk. He's that outlaw, Tom Ackers!"

Bitterness flooded like a molten tide through Clay Dunn. As if from a distance, he heard the exultant whoop that burst from Jason Breen's lips. He knew that the Boxed B riders were leaping for their weapons. There was no time for denial, and somehow he felt a denial would fall flat on the ears of this obdurate man. Fury was in Mackey's stony eyes, and a savagery Dunn had never seen before.

"I said drop that shotgun, blast yuh!" Mackey shouted.

Something burst within Clay Dunn, exploding every muscle of his body into flashing movement. He leaped to one side with a suddenness that caught the Double D foreman off balance. The shotgun sheered around to level on Beth Mackey. Dunn's yell rang out stridently.

"Lay off, Mackey! Try to stop me now and the blue-whistlers in this gun will cut Beth to pieces."

He faced around to get Breen and his men under his eye. They were leaping toward their weapons, but jerked to a halt at the slight swerve of the shotgun. Dunn's command came in an icy, staccato tone.

"One barrel of this scattergun is enough to drop the bunch of yuh. Hop back away from them guns, or yuh'll get what yuh're honin' for."

But through all of this, Roy Mackey hadn't moved. He stood as if rooted, his truculence apparent through the indecision that was growing over his face. His guns still jutted toward Dunn, but for the moment he seemed utterly unconscious of them.

"Yuh'd murder this gal?" he croaked out hoarsely.

Beth Mackey stood before the muzzle of Dunn's shotgun, a slender figure of defiance. Surprise, scorn and contempt mingled in her dilated eyes, but there was no fear in the marble whiteness of her face. Yet there was an appeal in her voice, as if she found it impossible to yield to what seemed absolutely obvious.

"You're not what Uncle says," she faltered. "He has made a mistake, hasn't he?"

Her small, white face and the hurt in her eyes cut into Clay Dunn like a chill blade, but his lips remained an inflexibly hard line.

"I reckon whatever I could say wouldn't be believed here, anyhow," he said.

He saw contempt curl her lips, and knew that all doubt had fled from her mind. A hot fury leaped through him, bringing harsh savagery to his tone.

"All right, then. As far as all of yuh are concerned, it's cut and dried who I am. But that don't finish me up here." He backed away, cold menace in every movement. "Beth, get on yore hoss and pull over here. Carson, yuh're goin' along with us, and the same goes for you, Mackey."

BUT Roy Mackey was stubborn and unmoving.

"Yuh mean yuh're taking Beth away from here by force, Ackers?" he jarred out.

"Jest that!" Dunn whipped back. "And yuh're goin' along. There's more than one way to make gents like you and Carson listen to reason."

"I ain't goin'!" Mackey's voice came in an explosion of wrath. "Mebbe I can't stop yuh from draggin' Beth off, but yuh shore can't make me go with yuh. I'm goin' to town, killer, and when I come back it'll be with a posse. If yuh want to stop me, yuh can use that shotgun and be hanged."

He turned then, defiance in every

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line of his stocky body. Without a backward glance, he climbed aboard his horse and rode off.

Dunn's lips were thin and flat as he watched the girl swing onto her waiting mount. Carson strode stiffly forward at the jerk of the shotgun, his face a hard, gray mask.

"The only reason I'm goin' along is to make shore nothin' happens to the girl," he stated.

Dunn snorted frigidly.

"Yuh shore think high of me, don't yuh, Sheriff?"

He whistled to his horse. Then, without taking his eyes from Breen and his men, he swung quickly into saddle. A smother of stagnant silence fell as he started to back away. He knew what would happen the instant he took his eyes from the Boxed B gunmen. He realized what hung in the balance, for only his death stood between Jason Breen and the red brand of the law.

"Don't crowd yore luck too far, boys," he said thinly. With a yell at Carson and the girl, he whipped his horse around and touched it with his spurs. From the corner of his eye, as he twisted around in his saddle, he saw the gunmen leap forward to snatch up their guns savagely. The sheriff read their grim intent, and his voice rang out piercingly.

"Stop it, Breen, yuh fool! Yuh want to hit this gal?"

But Jason Breen and his men were beyond the reach of appeal. Murder-lust held them in its flaming grip. Their guns snapped up, steadied, bounced, blared. Dunn heard the whip of close-passing lead, felt a swift clutch of fear as he realized Beth was just ahead of his racing mount, in the line of fire.

He jerked up the shotgun. There was no time for aiming or judgment of speed or distance. He pulled both triggers as the gun snapped level, felt the jarring bounce of the recoil. He saw the slugs, thrown into the ground several feet short of their target, kick up little geysers of dust.

He threw the empty gun to one side. His face cold and bleak and hard, he twisted around in his saddle to yell at the man and girl racing just ahead of him.

"Bear off to the west and ride! They'll be after us as soon as they get their hosses. Hades won't be no hotter than today, if yuh try to stall and let them get close!"

THE brass ball of the sun was nearing the zenith when Clay directed the sheriff and Beth Mackey to the mouth of the cavern at the end of the box canyon. Carson twisted around angrily at Dunn's orders to ride on in.

"Where the devil do yuh think yuh're takin' us?" he flared. "If yuh think I'll stand by and see yuh take this gal into there, yuh're crazy."

Dunn jerked his gun, lips a white-ringed line. There was no time for reasoning or argument. They thought of him as a killer, an outlaw, and he had to play the part.

"Yuh'll get in there pronto, if yuh don't want a slug in the head," he raked out.

A chill raced down his spine as he heard the muted drumming of hoofs near the canyon mouth a quarter of a mile behind them. If they were caught here, it could end but one way. At the beginning of the long hard ride, he had seen Breen dispatch a man to bring the rest of his gang into the hunt.

He whipped up his gun, started it chopping down in a vicious arc toward the lawman. Carson's face blanched, but he didn't flinch. It was Beth's quick outcry that swung the balance, horror leaping into her eyes.

"Don't! Please don't!"

Dunn halted the chop of his gun, holding his face savage.

"You'd kill him, wouldn't you?" he heard her ask in low contempt.

"I will if he don't get movin'," he grated.

"Then I'll go willingly, Sheriff," she said wearily. "Thank you for what you would have done."

She swung her horse then and headed it into the black maw of the cavern. Carson hesitated, still fighting the lash of his anger. With a sneering oath, he turned to follow the girl.

It seemed as if a crushing weight had been lifted from Clay Dunn as his mount groped its way through the darkness. There was no sound, save for the faint scrape and scuff of hoofs ahead, nor did he hear anything of Breen and his men in the smother of silence.

As the minutes lengthened, the blackness gave way to a faint gray. He heard Beth's low cry of surprise.

"Why, there's an opening up ahead!"

Sheriff Carson was the first to catch the full significance, and his voice came in a growl of amazement.

"It's a hidden canyon. That cave leads through half of the mountain to it. I been around this part of the country thirty years, and I never stumbled onto this here place."

"Yuh coulda lived here another thirty years and probably never would have discovered it," Dunn said dryly.

The lawman twisted around in his saddle, face gray and hard.

"So that's yore plan!" he jerked out hoarsely. "Yuh figure on holdin' us here, where we'll never be found, till yuh can swing yore crooked deal! Yuh can start shootin' me now, yuh polecat, but this gal ain't stayin' here!"

HE 'tensed for a mad leap, but something in Dunn's level stare held him motionless. Dunn was smiling as he drew the lawman's guns and held them out butt-first. The bleak savagery of the hunted was no longer in his face.

"If yuh're so set on leavin', Carson, yuh'll need these," he said quietly.

The sheriff stiffened, a frown of perplexity creasing his brow.

"Man, are yuh loco?" he croaked. "Yuh threaten to murder us if we don't come here. Now that we're here, yuh're willin' to turn us loose. What kind of a game are yuh playing, anyhow?"

Clay shrugged cynically, feeling the girl's searching eyes upon him. Silence built up between them. When he finally spoke, a trace of bitterness added strength to his tone.

"I saved yore lives, but still yuh think I'm an outlaw." He tossed the guns and saw the lawman catch them. "If yuh still want to leave here, I won't try to stop yuh. Yore life is yore own, but yuh'll have to kill me to take Beth Mackey out to face Jason Breen."

Wonder and disbelief were in the sheriff's hard eyes.

"Yuh say I'm free to go, after takin' all that trouble to get me here. Why?"

"I hoped mebbe yuh'd listen to reason if I got yuh here."

Uncertainty crossed Carson's grim face. He flashed a glance at his guns, and his amazement deepened when he saw that the weapons had not been unloaded.

"Well, if this ain't the locoest—" he began hoarsely. He broke off to jam his guns into their sheaths. "All right, mister. Mebbe I'm makin' myself a fool from head to heels, but I'm seein' this through. Let's hear what yuh got to say."

Clay relaxed, and a grin struggled to his stiff lips.

"I reckon yuh won't be sorry," he said quietly. "But we'll go down to the bottom of the canyon first, before I say anythin' else."

He led off down the narrow trail, with the lawman following close behind, and Beth coming last. When the trail sloped off to a grassy

meadow, he halted and slipped from saddle.

Beth dismounted, and the lawman dropped to the ground, puzzled yet wary. Dunn waited through a trenchant moment. Because he was expecting the sound and straining to catch it, he alone heard the almost inaudible scuff of boots coming up the trail.

"Beth, yuh tried to believe in me, but yuh found it hard," he said with faint disparagement. "I don't blame yuh for that. But, Carson, yuh didn't give me a decent chance. Yuh doubted who I was all along. Mebbe yuh had reason enough for that, but yuh was quick to believe Breen when he thought he had me framed as a hoss-thief. Yuh took his word when he claimed I started that ruckus. I didn't get a chance to tell you what really happened, but yuh wouldn'ta believed me if I had. All that is why I brought yuh here."

From the corner of his eye, Clay saw his father stride out of the nearby cottonwoods. Carson sensed the approach before he actually heard the oldster's steps. His face went hard, as if all the time he had suspected this to be a trap. With an oath, he stabbed his hands down to his guns as he whirled.

CHAPTER XVI

One Chance

NUMBLY Carson halted his violent movement as if he had been struck. His terrific tension sustained a sudden shock. His hands dropped numbly away from his guns, and his face made a swift transition from grim desperation to open amazement. His words seemed jerked from his throat as by force.

"Hank Dunn!"

Beth Mackey had been turning bewilderedly. As she caught sight of the oldster, her face drained paper-white. She swayed and then steadied, small hands fluttering up to her throat.

"Daddy Dunn!" she breathed, strained and haltingly. "And we thought— All the time, we thought you were dead!"

Old Hank Dunn grinned crookedly, his stride shortening as he drew near.

"Well, there was a time I wouldn'ta argued much about that," he chuckled coolly. His eyes pulled around to Clay's drawn face. "Son, I'm shore glad to see you back."

Beth Mackey turned woodenly, lips quivering slightly, a quick mist darkening the blue of her eyes. She moved hesitantly toward Clay, halted before him.

"I didn't believe you," she whispered. "You should hate me. But, Clay, could you forgive me?"

Clay's smile was his answer. She sank against him, sobbing softly, and his arms closed around her. He chuckled, low and warm.

"This is the surprise I had for yuh, Beth," he said.

"I'm every kind of a fool yuh said I was, and a lot yuh didn't mention," Sheriff Carson growled, when Clay had finished relating the events until then. "No wonder Breen wanted to close in on the Double D so fast. He wanted to clean this place out and hightail for home before yuh could prove who yuh are."

"And to give his men a reason to gun me when I tried to stop them," Dunn put in dryly. "Even if they'd got away with the Double D stock, the law woulda been after them when I proved who I am. They figgered Dad was dead, and I was the only one left to deal with."

The lawman's mouth was a harsh line, and chill lights glinted in his

pale blue eyes. He turned his cold glance on old Hank Dunn.

"Yuh say it was Breen that tried to kill yuh and put yuh here?"

THE oldster shook his head.

"I didn't say it was Breen," he answered. "I couldn't swear it was Breen's men. They were all masked. But that jigger Slade, who was in thick with Breen, was roddin' the outfit. I seen his face plain."

"Then why didn't yuh show up before to spill about this?"

"Because up till a week ago I didn't care whether I lived or died!" Hank Dunn bridled. "I lost a lot of blood, and I had a busted leg on the mend. And since then I've been too busy tryin' to nurse myself well again to figger on a ten-mile walk home, not knowin' if there was a bunch of gunslingers huntin' for me or not. Seems to me yuh're taking a mighty funny slant at this, Carson."

"I'm jest lookin' at this through a law book," the sheriff snapped back. "As it stands, yuh can't prove a thing against Breen. He's in the clear as far as the law goes. Yuh seen Slade, yeah. But Slade's dead, and he was a long way from the Boxed B when he was killed. Yuh can't identify none of the other gents, that's shore."

"But what about Breen's attempt to kill Clay?" Beth Mackey broke in.

"He's got a bill of sale to the Double D, ain't he?" Carson retorted. "If yuh prove it's forgery, he can still claim he didn't know anythin' about it and was within his rights when he jumped Clay. He can call young Ackers the forger, and Ackers shore can't say he ain't."

"Looked to me like Breen showed his hand plain enough when he cut loose with his guns at the corral against yore orders," Clay said thinly.

"Yeah, and he can claim he thought yuh was an outlaw kidnaping a girl and a lawman," Carson growled. "Shore, yuh got a good case against Breen, but none of yore evidence is worth a hoot in court."

"If I can prove he's in with the hoss syndicate and that one of the outfit murdered Tom Ackers," Clay said, "I reckon we can start knotting hangropes."

The lawman's voice leaped.

"Can yuh prove that?"

Clay Dunn chuckled bitterly and shook his head. He told of Ackers' saddle-blanket, with the cryptic blood-marks on it. At the end the sheriff slumped back against the rock he had been leaning on.

"That sounds the same to me as it did to Roy Mackey," he grunted. "Ackers was shot up and dyin'. He made them marks trying to stay on that white stallion."

"Mebbe," Clay admitted.

In the heavy silence the heat of the western sun seemed like physical pressure on Clay's back. He felt irritated at Carson's cynicism, and yet he knew there was cold logic behind the lawman's arguments. They had no case against the owner of the Boxed B. Breen had played his hands too cautiously. Suddenly the sheriff began chuckling. They looked at him with blank, questioning stares.

"Breen got a jolt, I bet, when he seen his frame had bit him," he said with grim humor. "So while they was goin' for help, yuh switched that handkerchief marker, huh? And when they come back, they rustled their own hosses!" He barked a short, truculent laugh. "Why didn't yuh say sometin' about it when yuh braced Breen at the corral? Yuh mighta handed me a different slant at this whole business."

CLAY DUNN smiled thinly.

"I thought I could scare Breen into tippin' off his connection with the syndicate."

"And got yoreself killed doin' it!" the sheriff snorted.

"He couldn'ta tried any more than

he did," Clay reminded pointedly. "And he'll keep on tryin' if he locates this canyon. Only this time we're bottled up and he'll have to wipe us all out before he's through."

Carson's eyes narrowed, then widened, and a tinge of gray rode up the hard line of his jaw.

"He wouldn't go that far, I reckon," he grunted. But there was no conviction in his tone. Clay Dunn stood up, bleak purpose in every line of his body.

"Two times Breen's men have seen me disappear into that box canyon," he said softly. "They'll hunt this time until they find that cave. Mebbe Breen could bluff his way through a law court now, but he's playin' with the syndicate for big stakes. We won't stand a chance if he finds that cave, so I'm goin' for help."

"Where?" Carson demanded.

"Mesquite town."

Beth Mackey swayed forward, suddenly white and shaken. Fear tumbled with her words from her lips.

"Clay, you can't! Your horse is tired. So are mine and the sheriff's. You'd never get away alive! They'd run you down and—" Her voice faltered there.

"Dad, you take Carson's rifle and stay here on guard, in case they find the cave," Clay said stiffly. "Sheriff, you get yore hoss and ride with me. There's one chance of gettin' through this, and I'm takin' it. That chance is a hoss that never has been outrun—White Star, grazing at the other end of the canyon!"

They caught the white stallion when the sun was sinking below the rim of the granite west wall and the depths of the canyon were gathering the haze-gray of dusk. It was Clay's loop that dropped over White Star's head as the giant stallion tried to break past him toward the far end of the canyon. Trained as he was, Clay's mount halted with a shower of dust, braced himself for the shock.

The rope snapped taut and the momentum of the wild horse, all four feet clear of the ground, smashed him heavily back to the earth.

Carson's whoop lifted hoarsely.

"Boy, yuh got him! He's devil all the way through. Watch out he don't charge yuh!"

But only for an instant was the giant stallion stunned by the impact of his fall. He hurled to his feet, shaking himself in his fury, plunging wildly at the end of the rope. As the sheriff circled him on his racing mount, White Star whirled, teeth bared, nostrils flaring, terror in his red-shot eyes. Clay's yell rang out.

"He's goin' to charge! Rope a hind leg and stretch him out!"

SHERIFF CARSON'S rope uncoiled like a living thing. As the stallion hurled forward with a trumpet of rage, the sheriff's loop flipped up around a hind leg. Carson's mount threw back quickly, stretching the captured hind leg and holding the wild horse powerless to plunge farther.

A subtle change that was warning in itself came over the stallion. It seemed to sense that a struggle would be futile, and stood motionless.

"He'll blow up if he gets a chance," the lawman cautioned grimly. "Look at his ears laid back. He's wild from head to hock. But, man, he's all hoss!"

Clay worked with swift, cool efficiency after that. He slid from saddle, his horse holding firm. He threw the loop of the rope he had taken from Beth over White Star's head. Then he backed away quickly to snub the rope tight around the trunk of a cottonwood. He turned back to strip the saddle from his horse.

He approached the stallion slowly, talking all the while in a low, crooning voice.

"Look out!" Carson warned tensely. "He'll hoof yuh shore, walkin' up to him like that."

But Dunn seemed not to hear. Without sudden movement, he lowered his saddle to the ground, then moved in close to the stallion. Gently he laid his hand on the horse's back. White Star didn't move. His muscles quivered slightly, but he didn't flinch. Talking soothingly, Clay ran his hand up the horse's neck and to his ears, scratching all the while. He heard the sheriff's low mutter of amazement behind him.

"I reckon I'm whipped. Walk up to a devil like that, and the hoss don't move! But that hoss' turn will come later. He's got plenty of fight, but he's old enough to keep it bottled. He'll explode all over when the right time comes."

Deliberately Clay smoothed the hair on the stallion's back, then carefully spread on the blanket. Only by the slight sinking of White Star's powerful body did he show that he was fully aware of what was going on.

Clay knew. He read the signs that would not have been obvious to an eye less practiced. The wild horse was quiet now, and in that he was all the more dangerous.

No expression was on Dunn's face as he heaved up the saddle. The horse settled a little more, muscles tensing. Dunn worked slowly, yet his cool efficiency gave him speed. He drew the cinch tight, and when the stallion grunted, pulled the strap in another notch. Then he stepped back, his tenseness showing only in the set of his lips.

"Beth, get ready to turn him back if he throws me and tries to break out of the canyon," he said quietly. "Carson, I reckon you know what yuh got to do."

The sheriff nodded grimly. Watching the stallion alertly, Dunn stepped in close, stirruped his foot and rose without haste to the saddle. He readied himself. For a moment after the lawman had pulled the ropes free and run to his mount, the stallion did not move.

"He must be sick!" Carson croaked.

CHAPTER XVII

Gun Gauntlet

INSTANTLY White Star came to life. He hurled forward, squealing with the rage of the wild. But Dunn had been ready, and he rode through this first mad plunge easily. Abruptly the stallion halted his headlong run. He seemed to explode, a tornado of squalling, pitching horseflesh.

He up-ended, rising high on his hind legs, lifting violently into the air, only to snap down again in a spine-jarring crash to the earth. He soared again, twisting, shaking savagely as he fought to dislodge the human burr on his back. But Clay clung on.

This was no rodeo show. There were no holds barred in this battle. It was the fight of a killer. Clay knew it, and he grabbed the horn to steady himself each time his seat in the saddle was loosened.

The stallion plunged, squirmed, writhed, his mad shrills of rage shattering the stillness of the hills. He lurched forward, then swapped ends like the snap of a bull-whip, clawed high and thudded down shaking viciously. Once he ceased bucking a moment to burst forward in a mad blaze of speed to crash through the cottonwoods.

Clay threw himself flat on the horse's back. He felt the stinging lash of branches, a numbing blow against his left shoulder. Then they were in the clear again and plowing around in wicked, hammering circles.

White Star's plunging gave way to desperation. He snapped into the air, sheered violently around and came down facing in the opposite direction. He flung himself up again, twisted and crashed down heavily on his side. But Clay swung clear and was again in the saddle when the horse jerked to his feet.

The fury and strength of the stallion seemed to increase, rather than diminish, and burst into a new paroxysm of plunging. Clay felt no consciousness of passing time. It seemed that the world itself had come apart and was crashing down upon him. He was dizzy and his senses blurred, yet through it all a grim singleness of purpose held to him.

White Star was a horse that had to be beaten, subdued by his own breed of viciousness. Clay felt no qualms when he whipped his quirt across the stallion's nose. The horse shook his head, squealing in rage. Sunfishing into the air, he swung his hind legs, came down twisting. He corkscrewed and sunfished again. Then, without warning he threw himself into a backward somersault.

Clay's movement seemed slow by comparison, and yet in his deliberateness his action was deadly swift. Through the roaring in his ears, he heard Beth Mackey's scream of fear, the lawman's hoarse yell of warning as the horse rose high on his hind legs.

He caught the quirt lashes with his right hand, jerked his left from the wrist loop, then chopped the loaded butt down between the horse's ears. It was a vicious blow, and yet no more vicious than had been the stallion's murderous intent. It brought the horse back down on all fours, weak and stunned. But even more, it defeated him.

Carson rode in close. Through the haze that swirled before his eyes, Clay could see anger in every line of the lawman's white-pinched face.

"He's killer all the way through, that white devil!" Carson declared harshly. "That hoss oughta be shot!"

Clay nodded wearily.

"He's killer, all right," he said, "but I reckon he won't try that on me again. You better stand guard with Dad. I'm ridin'."

Beth came forward, her face white and shaken.

"But you're tired, Clay! You should rest first."

Clay's hard lips twisted into a smile.

"And let this hoss get corked up again?" He chuckled bleakly. "If he's got any fight left in him, he'll get plenty of chance to run it out. I've gotta get help—if it ain't already too late to bring it."

DUSK lay a smother of unearthly gloom on the canyon when Clay Dunn halted the stallion at the outer mouth of the cavern. He sat there a long moment, testing the weighted silence and registering no foreign sound.

But he knew that death was here. Its grim pattern was a thing that could be felt and almost touched, and yet he detected nothing tangible. There was no sound to break the stagnant hush, no movement in the looming shadows of the boulders before him.

He waited. Then, because the press of time was heavy upon him, he nudged his horse into movement. The stallion moved with the silence of the wild. Prompted by a caution that was inborn, Clay swung down the narrow lane parallel to the canyon's end wall.

For thirty yards he moved unchallenged down the dust-matted trail, then angled off, threading his way guardedly through the boulders. He halted again where the rocks thinned out on the open floor of the canyon. An early moon was spilling its ghostly light into the granite depths, painting pale shadows beyond the boulders and cactus growths.

The silence was like a crushing

weight, ominous, foreboding. His eyes, widened to gather in every particle of light, shifted about him. He caught no movement. Could Breen have called his killers off?

But that questioning thought was quickly driven from Dunn's brain. Someone was here, watching and waiting. He could feel an unseen presence. His hands dropped to his guns, and without a sound, he drew them.

Then a palpable sense of danger closed cold fingers around his heart. He felt his eyes being pulled around toward the mouth of the canyon. No more than half a dozen rods away, he saw the two riders approaching guardedly. He heard a low, scratchy voice.

"Blast this moon! Is that a hoss up there, or jest another rock? It moved!"

A hoarse yell rocketed through the canyon, bounding and rebounding between the close-set walls. The chill of ice flooded Clay Dunn's veins. He leaned forward to brace himself, dropped the reins and lifted his guns.

White Star, for the first time, felt the bite of spurs. Even as the yell of warning blared out, the giant stallion hurled forward to plunge clear of the rocks. A gun crashed, another, to shatter the echoes of the hoarse outcry.

Dunn felt the whip of close-passing lead as he threw himself low across the saddle. Horsemen, guns crashing and flaming, materialized from the boulders that footed both walls of the canyon, closing in with swift, deadly intent. A booming voice that could have belonged only to Jason Breen roared out.

"It's Dunn on that white stallion! Cut the dirty skunk down, yuh lead-slammers!"

THERE was no chance to dodge or avoid the gunmen. The distances in the narrow canyon were too short and they contracted so rapidly that it seemed to Dunn the earth itself was being spun under him. He had never before experienced such flashing speed from a horse.

White Star stretched out in terror, mane flowing back like a white sheet, muscles bunching, rolling, snapping, hoofs drumming in a continuous roar. Three times Dunn felt invisible fingers pluck at his shirt, and knew that the burning shock of lead had spared him by scant inches.

It seemed incredible that he had escaped for so long the slugs that searched him through the night air. The walls of the canyon reverberated to the blatant crash of guns. A bunching line of spurting red stabbed lances of powder-flame at him as he hammered closer.

His guns swung up, still silent but ready. The line of gunmen swept nearer, blocking the canyon's mouth.

[*Turn page*]

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He was not conscious of personality or figure. There was no distinguishing the gunmen converging before him. The gloom masked their hard features, but they were all of one stamp—men from whom hatred and murder-lust had stripped all save raw, unbridled viciousness.

As the line of gunmen gathered to block his way, a harsh yell of bitterness and derision ripped from Dunn's throat. He swayed forward, bracing himself in his saddle.

Suddenly his guns came to life. White Star sheered off wildly at the first crashing shot, almost unseating his rider. But Dunn caught his balance with grim desperation.

He didn't single out individuals for his targets. The murk of the gathering night and the jarring pound of his horse's hoofs prevented that. But not all his slugs spent themselves in the

empty air. He heard the piercing scream of a horse as the yards shortened to feet. He saw a man in that tight knot of killers slump and crumple from his pitching horse. He heard another's strangled sob of agony.

But slugs were impotent at this moment. Lead alone could not blaze a path through Jason Breen's tight-bunched gunmen. Dunn knew that as he flashed closer. White Star also seemed to sense the issue. With a piercing scream he hurled on without swerving. It was man against men, horse against horses, with no quarter asked or given. White Star struck with his head high and both feet clawing out before him. The knot of horses gave before the giant stallion's inflexible drive and White Star hammered his way on, using teeth and shoulder and hoof.

For Clay Dunn, the night was a chaos of violence and bloodshed. Guns crashed and blared and flamed, but in those close quarters he held the advantage. He was but one among many in that milling mass, and he was not forced to hold his fire to single out foe from friend.

The roar of his bouncing guns was lost in the Colt inferno. Time was lost for a moment. Then, so suddenly that he was not aware of it at first, his mount burst through the line and hurled into the clear.

JASON BREEN'S yell of fury rose and fell behind Dunn.

"He's through! Ride that devil down, curse him!"

Dunn twisted around in his saddle to empty his guns at the shadowy forms of the killers. None of his slugs found their mark, nor did they slow down the riders racing after him. They swept on, a dark tide of savagery that strung out rapidly as the faster horses sped ahead of the slower ones.

Dunn laughed harshly. Careful not to break the stride of the stallion under him, he reined in slightly to bait the killers on. The chilling night air whistled past him as he flashed down the valley. White Star ran smoothly and easily, and with the heart that wildness had given him, he was slowly outdistancing the horsemen behind.

A mile flashed by, and another, and the killers dropped farther to the rear. But no longer were they to be led on, for faint in the distance, Dunn heard Jason Breen's hoarse yell.

"Let him go! He can't do nothin' we can't clean up later. We've gotta get Carson and that gal. Make some torches and get back to the canyon. There's a break in that wall someplace, and I aim to find it!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Colt Judgment

PEACEFULLY the crescent moon was soaring high above the smother of darkness when Clay Dunn drew near to the town of Mesquite. He had held the stallion in the last few miles to save its strength, although the horse had given no hint of being winded.

He reined White Star to a walk when he reached the hoof-riddled main street, an awareness of trouble mounting within him. The hour was nearing ten, and the night life of the town seemed to be increasing its clamorous tempo, rather than showing any signs of abating.

Even more ominous was the restlessness of the town, the little crowds of men who milled from one saloon to the next, talking in a significantly guarded manner. Clay noted that as he moved his mount slowly up the street.

He noted also that one saloon near the middle of the town seemed to be gathering most of the townsmen and punchers. It was a large, sprawling structure of adobe, with a shingled roof that sloped across the plank walk, which was flanked by a long and well filled hitch-rail.

Clay halted here, trying to plumb the temper of the town. The usual clamor of drinkers and gamblers, the crass laughter of the dance girls were present, but there was something more—a low, harsh murmur of men's voices that pervaded the air with foreboding.

He was preparing to dismount when two men came down the street. They halted at the saloon door, cast him a cursory glance. He saw one of them look again and stiffen, something leaping across his hard-pinched face. Then hurriedly the two turned and pushed into the saloon.

A faint, cold smile touched Clay's lips as he heard the harsh murmur of excitement that floated to his ears, only to be lost in a swift clutch of silence. He tensed, eyes narrowing, drawn nerves probing the sudden threat of danger that fell.

Then he heard the scrape and scuff of boots. Presently a man came through the doors to lounge indolently against the side of the saloon. Another appeared with exaggerated casualness, then another. A crowd formed swiftly.

Not a muscle moved along Dunn's lean frame as his glance flashed over them. At last a thin-edged voice jarred out to shatter the strained hush.

"Yuh're the hombre that calls hisself Tramp Dunn, ain't yuh?"

Clay nodded easily, eyes cold and hard.

"I am Dunn," he stated flatly.

The silence flowed around them again, keen and vibrant. There was no movement among the crowd. They watched him icily, sneers forming slowly on their thinned lips. Then a man snorted in harsh contempt.

"Yuh shore got gall! There's reward posters all over town for yuh, and yuh figure yuh can throw yore bluff on us!"

ANGER gathered and broke within Clay Dunn. He stiffened in his saddle, fighting his temper, then felt it flare loose.

"Wait a minute, yuh hombres," he ripped out. "I know what yuh're thinkin', and I ain't got time to argue with yuh. Breen's men have been here, spreadin' their lies about me bein' Tom Ackers."

"Which, of course, yuh ain't!" a man jeered raucously.

"Oh, no! All he does is say no, and we're supposed to believe him!"

"Yuh've run yore bluff about far enough!" a third put in savagely. "I reckon yuh saved us a long hunt, ridin' in here. If yuh want to stay in one piece, polecat, shut up yore lies and tell us what yuh done with Carson and Beth Mackey!"

Clay Dunn listened out this stormy outburst, his face chilling to a hard, gray mask. A scalding tide of bitterness churned through him, and with it came a fury that jerked tense every muscle of his body.

Being looked upon as Tom Ackers, the outlaw, was something he had expected and been prepared for. But to encounter such malevolence and know it had been fostered by a misguided friend was what stunned him. He searched the growing crowd for old Roy Mackey, but didn't see him. When he spoke, he had to force his voice to remain steady.

"Listen, yuh fools!" he said, low and without rancor. "I don't blame yuh for mistakin' them wanted posters to be out for me instead of the man who was killed a couple days ago. Tom Ackers and me did look somethin' alike, and the description would fit either of us. But I'm Clay Dunn. I'll prove that if yuh let me. And nothin' has happened to Carson and Beth Mackey—not yet! But somethin' will happen to them if yuh don't listen to reason.

"I made 'em ride off with me to save 'em from Breen and his men, and because it was the only chance I had of provin' to 'em who I am. When I left them, they was safe in a hidden canyon on the west boundary of the Double D. But they need help. Breen and his gang are lookin' for them, and if they don't get help soon, nothin' can save 'em."

"That's a plain lie!"

The harsh statement had jarred out from the far end of the crowd. Dunn's swift glance jerked to the short, square man who was shouldering forward. Roy Mackey's face was hard with virulence, his sun-faded eyes cold and bleak, his lips a fierce unrelaxing line.

He halted at the inner fringe of the crowd, hatred in every line of his body.

"I said that was a lie, mister!" he snarled again. "I got no lost love for Jason Breen and his men, but I shore can't stomach this. What are yuh tryin' to frame onto Breen, anyway? By Gawd, if yuh done anythin' to my niece, I'll kill yuh if I have to hang for it."

"Mackey, for Beth's sake, give me a chance!" Clay Dunn croaked hoarsely.

But he got no further. Mackey barked a short, harsh laugh of scorn.

"Give yuh a chance?" An oath ripped from his lips. "Yuh got yore chance, younker, and I don't make a fool out of myself twice. When I came here to town, lookin' for you the other night, I still wouldn't believe yuh wasn't Clay Dunn when I seen them wanted posters. So I wired to the town in Arizona where Beth's mail went when she wrote for Dunn.

"I got word back that they'd traced Tom Ackers into the Whetstones west of there, and Dunn had headed straight here. That makes Clay Dunn the man we buried. Yuh're Tom Ackers, because it took yuh two weeks to double back from the Whetstones and get here!"

CLAY'S words seemed torn from his throat.

"Roy, that ain't true. I can prove it if yuh'll give me a chance. Dad's alive! I found him in that hidden canyon, and he'll—"

"Yuh what!"

At that hoarse exclamation, Roy Mackey swore stridently.

"Yuh think yuh can make me believe that?" he flared. "I worked for Hank Dunn for better than twenty years, and I know that man. He's been missin' nearly six weeks, and if he'd been alive he'da showed up a long time be-

fore this. So yuh ain't had enough yet, huh? All right, I'll show yuh how yuh stand here. Cochran!"

The name leaped like living flame across Clay Dunn's brain. At last he was to meet the third of that murder vendetta in Arizona! His hot eyes jerked around to fix on the tall, bony man who pressed through the saloon doors without putting out or raising his hands from his holstered guns.

A storm of wrath flamed across Dunn's brain. Without taking his eyes from the killer, he snapped a bitter question at Roy Mackey.

"So yuh believe this polecat over me!"

Roy Mackey had no opportunity to answer. Cochran jerked to a halt, his bony face burning dark-red. His lean form sank perceptibly, and in that he revealed his grim intent.

"Polecat?" he grated, his eyes narrowing murderously. "Yuh'd like to keep me from spillin' who yuh are, wouldn't yuh, Ackers?"

Uncertainty ceased for Clay Dunn then. He changed subtly and became all the more dangerous for his cool deliberateness. He read Cochran's purpose, knew the killer was in with the syndicate. Cochran had fooled Mackey, but he knew he would have to kill Dunn to clinch his lies.

A smile touched Dunn's lips, cold and mocking. Without haste he swung his horse to leave his right side in the clear. Cochran fathomed the move and his hands, splayed out just over his guns, began quivering slightly.

"Throwin' yore guns won't shut me up, Ackers!" he yelled.

"Yuh want it that way, don't yuh?" Dunn said softly and waited.

There was a swift splitting of the crowd to form an empty aisle between the two men. Cochran was grinning now, yet on his face was the knowledge that death itself hung in the balance. His eyes were opaque, watchful without betraying his thoughts. He chuckled almost inaudibly.

"Yuh rotten gun-slinger!"

Almost too swift for sight, his body jerked in downward action. But Dunn's weapon seemed to bounce from its sheath, flashed upward in a blur and was lost instantly in an explosive black burst and a spurt of red flame.

Cochran's violence underwent a sudden shock. He rocked backward under the blast of lead, then sagged forward, his convulsive shot plugging harmlessly into the boards at his feet. Then, even as pain and horror registered on his hard, gray face, he pitched forward in an unmoving heap.

Dunn was in motion before the killer struck the ground. Whirling the stallion, he sent it down the street in a wild burst of speed. Gunfire crashed and blared behind him, but the slugs spent themselves in the emptiness of the night sky. Then he heard Roy Mackey's ringing yell.

"Hit leather and ride after that killer! We'll swing him sky-high for this job!"

MIDNIGHT had come and passed when Clay Dunn finally drew near the mouth of the box canyon, and weariness was laying its hold upon him. The strain of the pace to which he had been forced by the posse behind him had taken its toll. Fine lines of anxiety and strain were etched deeply into his face.

The night gave forth only the sound of the beat and rattle of hoofs, and an almost tangible sense of disaster permeated the air.

He wondered grimly if he could have heard the sound of shots from the hidden canyon beyond. He doubted that, for the wall of granite was too deep and the rising drafts of air would carry off all noises.

There was no challenge of Breen's gunmen as Clay swung his horse down the box canyon. That could mean but one thing. Breen had located the

cavern entrance and had passed on into the hidden canyon beyond.

The chill of ice flooded through Dunn's veins at the realization. Was he too late?

Almost savagely he drove the thought from his mind and cast a glance over his shoulder.

Silence rode with the posse strung out behind him. Their first wild flurry of shots had ceased miles back.

Since then they had dogged his trail, ferociously intent on running him down.

A thin smile twisted Dunn's drawn lips as he heard the exultant yell that burst out from the posse—Mackey's voice.

He recognized it with a galling pang of bitterness.

"He's boxed up! We got the dirty skunk now!"

SO Mackey's belief that he was Tom Ackers, the outlaw, was still unshaken. But soon he would know the truth. Then a quick doubt assailed Dunn. What if the plan he had staked all his hopes on failed? He had been acting on a wild hunch at best, doing what he had done the night before, when the Boxed B riders had invaded the Double D.

Grimly, as a savage burst of shots crashed from behind him, he forced his mind into another channel. Lead whipped the air around him, and he threw himself low over his horse's neck.

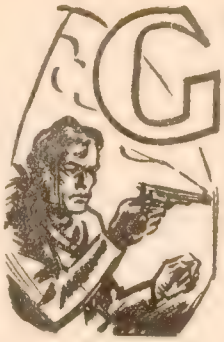
He cast a glance over his shoulder. The posse had gained on him, and their gun flames were like winking spurts of red jabbing at him.

Then the canyon floor slanted down across the shallow bank of the ancient creek. He swung the stallion off sharply through the boulder field. The harsh yell of a posseman jarred against his ears.

"He's cuttin' into the rocks! Rush him! Don't give him a chance to hole up!"

CHAPTER XIX

Killers Die Hard



GRITTING hoof-beats rolled closer with a rush. Over his shoulder Dunn could see the first of the posse charging recklessly through the rocks. A gun crashed, and he heard the scream of lead shunting from a boulder a scant arm's-reach away. His lips thinned out, and he started to touch the stallion under him with his spurs.

But there was no need for that. Too many times the horse had led his *manada* down this boulder-clogged creek bed. Dunn had to hold him in when he neared the black maw of the cavern.

Another gun blared, shattering the night's silence. Invisible needles of rock exploded into his face from the cliff wall. Roy Mackey's high-pitched yell rang out.

"He's headin' into a hole! Over here, men! We'll smoke the devil out!"

Every nerve in Dunn's body was drawn to the snapping point as the stallion started through the cavern. The possemen were scant yards behind him now, and his quick glance showed one of them outlined against the paler darkness of the night. He caught a low, smothered oath.

"This ain't no cave! It's like a tunnel leadin' to somethin'. I'm goin' in after that jigger!"

Dunn grinned thinly and gave the stallion its head. Minutes seemed to stretch into hours. The silence was a smother that was broken only by the scrape and thud of hoofs and the hoarse, unintelligible murmurs that floated to his ears from the posse.

Faintly Dunn caught the muffled crash of shots. Impatience clawed at him like strong fingers, but he held himself grimly. To rush into the hidden canyon now would be to whipsaw himself between the fire of Breen's men and the guns of the posse behind.

He reined in tensely when the cavern opened again into the night. He lifted empty hands above his head. Then almost instantly he felt the savage prod of a gun jabbed against his back. He didn't flinch. A harsh voice jarred against his ears.

"That's right, mister. Just keep them dew-hooks high and empty!"

Dunn grinned bleakly.

"Well, here we are, boys," he said.

Others were crowding up, grim and truculent, and a man cursed an oath of amazement.

"It's like he said! A hidden canyon—and look down below!"

The high moon flooded the canyon floor with ghostly light. Almost like shadows, Dunn saw the figures of two men scuttle from the cover of a clump of mesquite to throw themselves flat behind an outcropping of granite. A shot crashed from close to the canyon's side wall, to bring a barrage of gunfire from along the canyon floor. Dunn's eyes went cold and savagery leaped into his voice.

"And there are Breen's men closin' in on Beth Mackey and Carson—and my father!" he flung back bitterly. "Yuh wouldn't believe me in town. I had to make yuh chase me here to prove it!"

A MAN cursed with sudden doubt.

"Mebbe he's tellin' the truth at that. I seen that white stallion run, and there never was a hoss around here that could beat it."

Dunn twisted around in his saddle to find Mackey's hard-set face. When he spoke, his voice throbbed coldly.

"Roy, I told yuh in town that telegram yuh got had things wrong. I don't blame yuh for what yuh thought. But if I'da been lyin' I'd never let yuh catch me without a fight. I don't ask yuh to believe me now, but I'm goin' down in that canyon. If yuh want to stop me, yuh'll have to use yore guns!"

Without a backward glance, he swung the stallion down the narrow trail. Silence flowed in and he could see the scatter of Breen's gunmen crawling closer to the canyon wall. Then he heard a man's smothered oath behind him.

"He can't get away, can he? I'm aimin' to see a little more of this business before I jump off half-cocked again."

Through the pale of the night, Dunn saw half a dozen gunmen leap up from their cover to charge toward the canyon wall, guns crashing savagely. There was no answering fire from where Dunn knew his father, Sheriff Carson and Beth Mackey lay huddled. A cold tide churned through him.

Still halfway down the trail, Dunn kicked his mount into a run. He jerked his guns, roared two quick shots into the night. Then his yell rang out piercingly.

"Breen! Around here, blast yuh!"

Through the blare of gunfire his voice rolled out to bound and rebound between the close-set walls. He saw the gunmen halt, startled, whirl in uncertainty. For a moment surprise held them motionless. Then, as if with a common thought, they began drawing together.

They were waiting in a tense knot when Dunn rode up with the townsmen close behind him. Murder-lust glinted in Breen's dark eyes, but his face was expressionless. If Dunn thought he had partly understood Breen's perfidy before, he plumbed the full depths now.

Surprise struck Breen's hard visage, and his voice came in a blare of amazement.

"You! Curse yuh, I thought—"

He broke off, but his meaning was obvious. Dunn laughed harshly and said nothing, reading the bluff in the big man's words. He slipped from saddle and turned as he saw his father coming out of the rocks toward him. Hank Dunn's left arm hung bloody and limp, and his face was drawn and gray.

"Son, I shore am glad to see yuh," he growled. "We was fresh out of shells, and these skunks woulda finished us off in no time."

Breen's amazement was real this time, and the glint of fear struck his hard face.

"Hank Dunn!" he croaked.

"Yeah, Hank Dunn!" the oldster flared. "And if yuh'da had the time to run off this job, I'da been dead for shore this time."

COLD fingers of fear clutched at Clay Dunn. He spoke slowly, dreading the answer.

"Dad, is Beth—"

The oldster nodded his head jerkily.

"She's all right. A slug knocked off a chunk of rock and stunned her, but she's all right. Carson's bringin' her in."

It was then that Roy Mackey moved forward. Anger and self-condemnation mingled on his square face.

"So yuh are Clay Dunn," he forced out. "I'm sorry, boy, but I had no way of being shore. And that telegram, and that liar, Cochran—"

A warmth crept through Clay, but no expression reached the bleak lines of his face.

"Forget it, Roy," he said quietly.

Then he saw Beth coming out of the rocks, her weight against Carson's shoulder. Her face was white and drawn, showing a raw, red bruise over her temple. But the smile on her lips was steady when she saw Clay.

The lawman left her to stride forward, his jaw like chiseled granite. Blood matted his shirt high up on his shoulder, but he seemed unaware of pain. Wrath was in his eyes and in the pinched line of his hard lips as he halted to face Breen.

He saw the surprise that crossed the big man's features, and his laugh was harsh and bleak.

"I reckon yuh didn't know yuh'd throwed down on me, either?" the lawman ground out.

Breen's head jerked, and his voice came hoarsely.

"No, I didn't! Someone busted past us in that box canyon outside, and I thought it was you goin' for help."

"Then yuh shore have a funny way of recognizin' the man yuh're supposed to be tryin' to help," Dunn put in dryly. "Yuh throwed a lot of lead tryin' to drop me."

A tinge of gray struck Breen's hard visage, and he cuffed his hat back with his hand to reveal opaque eyes.

"That's a rotten lie!" he said in a rasp. "All right, then yuh're Clay Dunn. But I didn't know that. Yuh shore acted the part of a killer, and that was enough for me. I thought Carson had gone for help, leavin' the girl down here with you. I didn't recognize Carson or yore old man when we got here. It was dark and they cut loose right away and didn't show themselves none. And if they yelled anythin', we shore didn't hear 'em."

Clay Dunn smiled icily.

"Yuh don't think yuh can get away with that, do yuh?" he said softly.

Breen stiffened, and his face burned red.

"What are yuh drivin' at?" he demanded, and the rising inflection of his voice held a vast significance.

Dunn saw Hack Estes, his perpetual smile gentle and dispassionate, begin shifting clear of Breen. That movement seemed to be a signal that fanned the rest of the gunmen watchfully to either side.

"What do yuh mean?" Breen said hoarsely.

WITHOUT apparent haste, Dunn tied the reins of the stallion to a cottonwood, then drifted deliberately to one side.

"Mebbe yuh want me to tell yuh," he said in cold mockery. "I thought from the first yuh was in with the hoss syndicate that's taken over about everythin' along the border. But yuh played things so smooth, I couldn't prove nothin'. A gang tried to murder Dad, but he couldn't swear they was yore men, even though he knows they were.

"Yuh sent Slade away on another job when yuh learned Dad had seen his face. Then yuh had him killed to shut him up. Yuh tried to get rid of me at the same time, and it almost worked. But it didn't, Breen."

"What kind of a lie are yuh tryin' to ring in on me?" Breen shouted, his red features changing to gray.

"Yuh murdered Ackers, thinkin' he was me, and used the papers I give him to forge that bill of sale to the Double D," Dunn drove on inexorably. "But I couldn't prove that, either. I thought all the time you and yore crew was the guns under a syndicate boss nobody knew nothin' about. I thought yuh was being doublecrossed by yore boss, but I was wrong there, too. Yuh was a fool, Breen. Yuh didn't need guns to take over the Double D. We'da been ruined in another month, and the whole spread woulda been yores."

"Mine?" Breen choked out, his voice hoarse and strained. "Dunn, yuh're crazy!"

"Yeah, yores!" Dunn pressed on coldly. "Yuh was playin' for big stakes, Breen. Yuh knew the Army would need hosses if we went to war against Spain, and yuh aimed to control the market and name yore own price."

Breen's glinting eyes jerked around him, as if fixing the positions of his men firmly in his mind. His flat lips worked, and in that he showed his rising desperation. Beads of sweat broke out on his hard, gray face. He pulled a bandanna from his pocket to make a nervous swipe across his brow. His hand dropped away, still gripping the handkerchief, to leave a black smudge across his forehead.

Dunn's blood leaped, and his lithe form sank visibly, hands splaying out near his guns.

"Are yuh sayin' I'm the boss of that syndicate?" Breen asked haltingly.

"Sayin' it?" Dunn retorted fiercely. "I'm provin' it! Yuh didn't even let yore men in on it. Last night yuh ordered some of yore men to frame me for rustlin' with some of yore own stock. But part of them was out lookin' for me, and yuh didn't have enough to drive off my hosses. Yuh sent them back for help, and left a bandanna to mark the hosses they was to take, so they wouldn't make a mistake in the dark."

He paused, laughing harshly.

"Yuh fool, I was there and saw the whole thing. I made yore men drive off yore own hosses! I switched yore handkerchief to the other corral. And more than that, I rubbed some black ashes from a brandin' fire into yore handkerchief. And yuh just smeared some of that black on yore forehead!"

JASON BREEN flinched visibly. Then every muscle in his body seemed to freeze. The handkerchief slipped from his fingers to leave his hand empty and clawlike. He seemed to be gathering himself. Aware that something dire hung in the balance, he was steeling himself for the test.

"Yuh're smart, ain't yuh?" he said in a labored sneer. His breathing seemed to halt, lips slightly parted. Then blood and voice leaped with the plunge of his arms. "Plug him, yuh gun-slammers!"

In the fleeting moment there was nothing but the crash of Colts, the hoarse cries of wounded men, black bursts, spurts of orange fire, a swirling, choking pall of powder-smoke.

Dunn was conscious that he was firing only by the bounce and leap of his guns. He sensed, rather than saw, in the pale light of the moon, the twin gouts of dust that puffed from the front of Breen's shirt.

Breen went down as if his legs had been knocked out from under him. Painfully he clambered to his feet again, struggling to lift guns that suddenly seemed too heavy for his fast-waning strength to manage.

A townsman close behind Dunn sank to the ground with a low moan of agony that should not have been audible in the crash and roar of guns and the screams of men and horses. Dunn couldn't understand why he had heard it through the violent noise.

The ranks of the outlaws thinned rapidly. There were now no outcries. The gunnies slipped out of sight one at a time, sagging downward, as if drawn by the clouds of powder-smoke that billowed from their flaming guns.

After the blast of guns had silenced, there still was one gunny on his feet. He stood on wide-planted legs. Tall, lean and sardonic, he was wearing to the last his perpetual smile of calm virulence. It was Hack Estes. There was no fear or remorse in his eyes, nor was there hatred He was a man who had lived by his guns and was dying by them. He knew it, and the knowledge did not break his nerve.

The strained silence that flowed in was like the hushed wings of death itself. Hack Estes rocked slightly from toe to heel, hard lips trying to lock back a thin worm of blood. His pale eyes were bright, as if he saw some lethal vein of humor that was beyond the ken of everyone else.

As he swayed, Dunn started forward, only to halt at the shake of the killer's head.

"No good, Dunn," Estes said with a dispassionate chuckle. "Jest hung around to say I was wrong about you bein' only lucky. Yuh're good—with yore guns."

But still he clung to his feet, and his hard-pinched face wore a faint grimace of pain. His voice came lower this time, a halting whisper.

"Breen—got letters—Dunn—"

Dunn's blood leaped.

"What's that, Estes?" he demanded implacably. "Yuh're tryin' to tell me somethin'. Yuh can't die till yuh tell it!"

But Hack Estes seemed not to hear. His eyes, glazing rapidly, turned around him, as if trying to fix firmly in his mind everything he was about to leave. Then his gaze lifted toward the eastern rim of the canyon, and for a long moment he was silent. Again came that low, bitter, ironic chuckle.

"It'll be dawn before long—I reckon. . . . Too bad I can't hang around—to see it."

He was dead when he hit the ground.

CHAPTER XX

Killer's Way Out

RESOLUTELY intangible was the thought that remained beyond the reach of Clay Dunn's searching mind as he stood there. He couldn't forget Hack Estes' cryptic statement. It ate into his brain like fire.

"Breen — got letters, Dunn—"

No more than that. It was as impenetrable and unmeaning as the blood-marked saddle-blanket Tom Ackers had left behind him. Yet

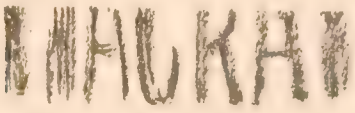
Dunn felt both men had been trying to pass on to him some message.

What was it? Had Estes been trying to say that Jason Breen had got letters from Ackers' body to use in his forging of the bill of sale? It was possible, but Dunn felt no conviction.

Then abruptly he was aware that White Star was pitching excitedly where he had been left tied to the tree. Dunn crossed to the stallion, still haunted by something he could not grasp. The stallion quieted as he drew near. Like a flare of flame Dunn suddenly realized that he stood at the horse's right side for the first time. The white hair on the stallion's side bore the answer that had so long evaded him!

He reached quickly and his hand trembled slightly as he pulled the blood-marked piece of saddle-blanket from his saddle-bag. He looked at it for a long brooding moment, and then his eyes went back to the horse. The animal's white side bore dark-stained lines that could only be blood. And Beth had said Tom Ackers had been trying to break the stallion when he had been murdered.

The thought ate deep into Dunn's brain, then struck another channel. His eyes, suddenly cold and bleak, studied the blood-marks on the side of the horse. They were cryptic, equally as much so as those on the blanket.



Meaningless lines that might have been left by a man's dying fingers, and yet he knew the answer lay somewhere in them. Uncertainty ceased for Dunn. He folded the piece of blanket along the crease that had been made by long usage. Now the lines bordered the fold of the blanket, and he knew!

He lay the blanket on the side of the horse, shifted it slowly. Abruptly the words were before his eyes. Numbness struck him, then a cold, driving fury that lashed uncontrolled through him.

He whirled, and his yell rang out piercingly.

"Mackey! Yuh murderin' Judas!"

Roy Mackey spun to face him, and with a single leap hurled clear of the townsmen. His face had drained to the gray of ash, and naked virulence lay in his faded blue eyes.

"What's eatin' yuh?" he flared hoarsely.

But he knew that the issue was irremediable. Still he held himself under control, strong hands white on the butts of his guns.

Beth's face was a white blur to Clay Dunn's eyes. As yet she had uttered no sound, plainly sensing impending violence, if not the issue itself.

"Clay, are yuh loco?" Roy Mackey yelled.

Dunn laughed with bitter harshness.

"Roy, I wish I was. I never figgered it was you! Now I remembered how yuh used to say yuh'd own the biggest hoss ranch in the country, but I never figgered the syndicate boss was you!"

MACKEY held a hard grip on his nerves. It was Beth's cry that struck Dunn, sharp, frightened, poignant in its appeal.

"Clay, you can't mean that!"

"So, after figgerin' Breen was the head of the syndicate, yuh decided to switch over to me!" Mackey said in a dark sneer.

His voice held bleak warning, but even more ominous was the faint quivering of his hands on the butts of his guns. Clay Dunn forced himself on, knowing the hurt each word was driving into Beth.

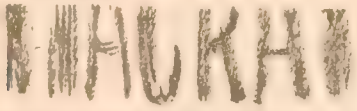
"I figgered all along that someone was orderin' Breen to use his guns when there wasn't no need of it. But I never reckoned it could be you. But it was you, Mackey—doublecrossin'

yore men so yuh could clean up on that Government hoss deal alone! That's what Estes meant when he tried to tell me about Breen gettin' letters. Yuh didn't wanta let 'em know who their boss was, so yuh sent Breen his orders through General Delivery. Why, the day Breen's men raided the Double D, yuh was in town mailin' some letters!"

Mackey's lips curled, his body sinking down over his guns. But he said nothing.

"Yuh murdered Tom Ackers!" Dunn drove on bitterly. "Yuh knew Ackers wasn't me, and yuh murdered him jest to start this war to get rid of Breen. But somehow Ackers recognized you. He tried to leave a message, writin' with his own blood on the side of the stallion he'd jumped on. But half of his words was printed on the horse, and half on his saddle-blanket. They was lines that didn't mean nothin' alone. But put the piece of blanket on the horse, and the lines match up."

He spun to lay the piece of blanket against the side of the stallion, matching the lines until they spelled their grim message.



"Ackers named yuh before he died," he flung out harshly.

He started to turn. It was then that he heard Beth's quick scream.

"Uncle Roy!"

Mackey's yell broke in stridently. Clay spun to see the man leaping back, drawn guns swinging in menacing arcs. His voice came with feral savagery.

"Cut a caper, any of you gents, and it'll be yore last! Clay, get away from that hoss! Yuh think yuh're smart, don't yuh? Well, let's see yuh figger out a way to stop me now!"

Silence flowed in, broken only by the faint, low sob of the girl. Clay faded away from the stallion tensely, aware of the blood-lust that flamed in Mackey's pale eyes.

"Yuh know yuh're goin' to get it, don't yuh?" Mackey sneered. "Well, yuh are—in the belly—but it'll come when I'm ready to give it to yuh."

He reached the side of the horse, paused, his lips flat and hard. Then, with a jerk of his left hand, he pulled the reins free and swung quickly into the saddle.

Clay saw what was coming. He tried to stop it, but there was no chance.

"Mackey, yuh fool—" he said hoarsely, and got no further.

Horror flooded through him. But Mackey didn't know. Because the stallion gave no move to betray his intent, the rider was caught unprepared. White Star gave a shrill trumpet of rage, then hurled upward, his forefeet clawing the air before him.

Too late, Mackey sensed what was coming. He tried to swing out of saddle, but there was no time. A scream sliced from his throat and then was choked into silence as the horse crashed to the ground on his back.

Clay whirled, unable to look, and ran to turn Beth's horrified eyes away. Silence that was burdened with bitterness closed down, and through it Clay heard Carson's grim murmur:

"I said that hoss was a killer."

THE night at this late hour was pale, and the crescent moon seemed to be dripping liquid silver on cottonwood, sage and mesquite. Shadows were fading, for above the eastern rim of the canyon the flush of the sky heralded the coming dawn.

Clay Dunn looked at the girl before him. He liked the way the soft masses of her hair caught and held the vagrant moonbeams. He could think of nothing more pleasant than to look into her misty eyes. Now they were losing their numbed look of pain, and the tenderness he saw in their depths stirred a vast warmth within him.

But when he spoke, his voice carried a faint banter.

"I've follered my nose over a lot of the country," he said, "but I never been up around Santa Fe. The Rio Grande starts up there, yuh know. It's higher country, and they say yuh can almost reach up and touch the stars, the air is so thin and clear. And there's some old Spanish Missions—"

She looked up at him searchingly.

"And you're going to leave home again—to go up there?"

Her question carried no hint of her emotions. He nodded coolly.

"I figgered I would," he drawled.

Swift anger clouded her eyes, and she started to pull away from him, but he held her close.

"You're just what I called you when we were kids," she said hotly. "Nothing but a—a tramp."

And to this Clay Dunn nodded easily again. He chuckled softly.

"I reckon we better get yuh a ring first off this mornin' if yuh're goin' with me. They say it's shore a fine place up there for a honeymoon."

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It's Make or Break When the Owlhoot Trail Leads Winton Up to a Dead-End of Danger!

Winton's fist smashed home to the jaw

DAL WINTON let his weary, sweat-drenched mount splash into the shallow waters of the creek and drop its head for a few hurried gulps. Twisting in the saddle, he scanned the country behind him. He was pretty sure he had shaken off the posse from the railroad camp back there in the canyon. The rocky bottom of the half hidden gully he'd cut into a while ago must have prevented any cutting of his sign.

And now he had circled back and was returning to the very railroad camp from which he had fled, after the body of Superintendent Jim Murphy had been found in his hotel room.

"The last thing they'd expect me to do," he mused. He pulled up his mount's head and spurred on across to to the other side.

It was then that he saw the girl. She stood in front a large cabin beside the trail. Back of the cabin was the side of a hill. A yawning hole bored its way back into the mountain, near whose mouth was a large pile of—yes, it was coal. The first coal mine Dal Winton had ever seen.

To his surprise she motioned for him to come over. He looked back first. There was nothing—no signs of riders on the grassy ridges to the west. He rode over and looked down at the slim figure in levis and work-stained flannel shirt. There was a black smudge on one cheek where she'd brushed it with her hand. Coal dust.

"Howdy," he said casually, and

tipped his hat to her respectfully.

She looked him over in a brief glance —the worn boots, scuffed leather chaps, the two heavy Colts tied low at his thighs, and the open flannel shirt. He saw then that there was a kind of desperation in those level blue eyes of hers.

"Do you want a job?" she asked unsteadily.

A faint grin twitched at the corners of his mouth, his brown eyes flicking to the mine tunnel. He, Dal Winton, the best tophand in the Dakotas, working as a coal miner!

She saw the faint grin and her eyes grew cold.

"I'm sorry," she said coolly. "Perhaps I made a mistake."

"What made you think I'd trade a lariat for a pick?" he asked curiously.

"Because I've been watching you through glasses. You kept looking back. You've been riding hard."

It was his turn to grow cold. The sardonic grin vanished from his face.

"Meanin'?"

"My father and I own this mine. We've a contract with the railroad for two hundred tons of coal that must be delivered within two months or we lose the mine. I don't know who you are. That's none of my business. But I do know that if a man had his face covered with coal dust—

Winton had turned in the saddle again and looked back. Far to the west there came a movement of antlike riders below a dusty smudge in the sky. He swung his tall, leather-chapped form to the ground. His horse was too tired to go on.

"I reckon you've hired yoreself a man, ma'am," he said. "Got any place around here where I could hide my hoss?"

"In the trees down along the river. You—you'd better hurry," she said a little breathlessly. "By the way, I'm Manda Joyce. My father isn't here just now. He's in town trying to scrape up two or three men. All the others quit."

HE loped off down the declivity and disappeared into the green screen near the water's edge. When he came back afoot he carried only some extra work clothes and a heavy repeating Winchester. There was an empty bunkhouse for the miners off to one side and in it he soon changed to levis and a pair of moccasins, a faded blue shirt.

By the time he got through, the cavalcade of dusty, weary riders led by Marshal Richman rode up and pulled rein.

Richman was a big beefy-faced man in his fifties. With Richman and the posse was Burt Longreen, assistant to the dead superintendent.

"Howdy, Miss Joyce," Richman said to the girl as he swung down and took the dipper out of the wooden waterbucket in the shade. "Seen anything of a stranger ridin' by the last coupla hours?"

The girl shook her head. "More trouble in town?" she asked.

"It's a stranger known as Dal Winton," put in Longreen. "He shot Murphy and robbed him. Killed him in cold blood."

Even at this distance, Winton saw the girl's face whiten a bit. He cursed himself for a fool. She'd turn him in, now that she knew why he was a fugitive. And he knew he wouldn't stand a chance of getting a w a y again, hemmed in on foot, away from his horse.

He stood, half-hidden in the bunkhouse doorway, a smudge on his face, wondering what his next move should be. He saw four more riders approaching the cabin. Something in the awkward manner in which the elderly man in the lead sat his horse identified him to Winton as Manda Joyce's father. Behind him rode a big Mexican and two others.

"There's plenty of men around camp who could be hired, too," muttered Winton to himself, his eyes going to the tunnel mouth. "Wonder why

Joyce an' the girl can't keep help?"

That answer came shortly after the posse rode away. Then the girl came down to the bunkroom. Winton was sitting carelessly on the edge of his bunk. The heavy guns he had worn were out of sight, as was the repeater. Only one of the weapons reposed in his shirt front. He got up as she came in.

"Why didn't yuh turn me in?" he said coolly, half jeeringly.

There was hostility and a touch of repugnance toward him written on her face. "I asked you to stay and help us," she said in a low voice. "You consented. To have turned you in—even after what I found out—would have meant your blood on my hands. But there mustn't be any misunderstanding, Mr. Winton—or whatever your real name might be. Murphy was a friend of my father's and of mine. It was he who gave us the coal contract, lent us money to develop this mine, and then took a lenient mortgage for the railroad company on it. It will be a different story now that Longreen has taken his place."

"I sorta got the idea he was sweet on you, judgin' from the way he acted out front there," jeered Winton, antagonism again flaring within him. She was condemning him without asking his side of the story. "That oughta make it plumb easy."

Once more he was Winton, the lone hand, saturnine, cynical, asking no favor of any man—or woman. He had had few friends in his life. He had been the kind of a man who made few friends.

HER level eyes fought back at his. "That's just the trouble—you've made it easier for him to—to—you've made it harder for me—oh, what's the use?" she cried out passionately and fled.

Joyce came out presently, a man in his early sixties, his gaunt body bowed from years in the mines. He directed the men to bunks and turned his mild eyes on Winton.

"So yuh're the new man Manda hired? Reckon you don't look much like a miner, but then we don't ask questions here. We need help too bad."

"I was sorta wonderin' about that," Winton said.

His eyes, however, were telling him things about the three men. They weren't miners either, though they might have been at one time. The muscular Mexican had eyes as black as the coal-pile outside and as cold. A bad hombre far away from his regular range, Winton decided. The other two unshaven men looked more like barroom brawlers.

"It's because three men have been killed by freak accidents," Joyce said. "The others quit. That gives the mine a bad name."

He glanced at the door and Winton followed him out into the yard, beyond hearing of the bunkhouse.

"So yuh're Dal Winton?" he said quietly. "Don't 'pear to be half the bad hombre Longreen makes out. Know him?"

"No, not personally," Winton replied. "He might know me, though. I was about camp quite a bit."

"I can set yore mind at rest on that score. I heard him say he'd never laid eyes on yuh." Joyce rubbed his knuckles along his hard jaw. "What about them gents in the bunkhouse? They change yore plans any?"

Winton felt himself liking this gruff old man. He smiled grimly.

"I'm glad of the chance to stay. It'll give me time to slip into the railroad camp. I've a hunch the gent that killed Murphy is still there."

Joyce squinted his kind old eyes at the younger man.

"I didn't think yuh done it. I wish yuh luck, lad."

He offered his horny hand. It was his way of telling Dal Winton he had a friend.

Late that afternoon Dal Winton, just finishing washing, saw Longreen ride up to the cabin and dismount. Big-bodied, face red and square, with a blaze of white skin across his high forehead, he looked and dressed the part of a cattleman—which he had been before turning to building railroads.

While Longreen talked with Manda, who stood on the porch, her father came out and started to lead the horse away. Joyce had gone only a little distance when she ran after him, said something, and then hurried back to the railroad man.

After the old miner had stabled the horse, he ambled down to the bunkhouse. He sat down on the bench beside Winton. Through the open window above them they could hear someone inside rattling a skillet on the stove. The odor of frying steak was strong.

"Yuh're to come up to the house for grub," Joyce whispered. "Manda's invite."

Winton was at once doubtful. He wasn't certain he could trust the girl. She might intend to reveal him to Longreen. But it would be better to be discovered now, than when a posse was present.

"We best be gittin' up to grub 'fore Manda comes yellin'," Joyce prodded.

THE old miner introduced Winton to Longreen merely as a new hand. The railroad man's shrewd eyes raked Winton with their suspicion.

"Stranger in this country?"

"Kinda," Winton admitted.

They moved over to the square table. Winton was on Longreen's right, Joyce to his left. Manda was still serving from the kitchen, hence the remaining chair was unoccupied.

Winton caught the railroad man looking at his rope-calloused hands.

"This steak shore has it on the ones I got at my last job," he said.

"Where was that?" Longreen asked.

"Wranglin' hosses," Winton replied, then lied: "I'm only a fair to middlin' rider, and it was hard work."

Manda took her place at the table then.

"It shore is fine to come here after a day like this one's been," Longreen said.

"You didn't catch that man?" she asked innocently.

"No, and it's got me up a tree," came the slow answer. "That gun-thrower just disappeared." He slanted a glance at Winton and added: "I've a feelin' he didn't leave the country, though. We couldn't cut his tracks anywhere. Bet he's holed up around here someplace."

"Of course," he went on cheerfully, "Marshal Richman is the best man-hunter in this country. He's sworn to smoke Winton out. He'll do it, too."

Manda sent a veiled glance at Winton. He showed her his mocking grin. Then, for the rest of the meal, Longreen devoted all his attention to the girl. It was quite obvious that he wanted her badly.

Watching him, Winton felt a growing resentment. Finally he stood up and said to Joyce:

"I'll saddle this gent's hoss for him."

He hurried out into the dusk without waiting for any protest. To himself he muttered: "That hombre riles me worse than skunk."

When he brought the saddle horse back to the house, Longreen was on the porch. He held Manda's hand.

"I'll be able to call often, now that I don't have so much work."

"I'm afraid I don't have much time for callers," she said. "You see, I help with the mine."

"When I call," he said easily, "yore pap will let yuh off." He mounted and rode away.

Winton growled his "Good night," and strode down to the bunkhouse. The three men quit talking when he entered. He tilted a chair against the wall and pretended to be absorbed in

rolling a cigarette. But he noticed the well oiled holsters the men wore.

The Mexican sauntered over before Winton and bowed.

"I, senor, am Paco."

"Howdy," Winton grunted. He was neither friendly nor hostile. He appeared unaware of the two men who were fanning out on either side of the Mexican.

"Who are you, senor?" Paco asked.

"Brownie is what most folks call me," Winton replied. He crossed his arms loosely on his chest. This put his right hand over the gun butt in his waistband.

"I theenk you are a liar, senor."

WINTON knew there would be no avoiding trouble with these men. For some reason, unknown to him, they didn't want him here.

"I don't see that yuh have any call to say that," Winton said.

"We do not work with strangers, *amigo*. You weel get a better job at the railroad."

"I dunno." Winton noted the Mexican's two companions had their hands gripping Colt butts. "I tried for a job there and didn't get it."

"Here," Paco snarled, fishing a dirty card from his vest pocket and thrusting it at Winton. "Show eet to Senor Longreen and you weel have a job."

Winton realized he would learn no more from these men without force. So, as Paco moved closer to give him the card, Winton swung up his foot. His toes cracked. The Mexican groaned and grabbed his shin. He fell to the floor.

The other two had snatched out their weapons. Their lead splintered the chair Winton had occupied a moment before. His own Colt was out and blasting. He saw his bullets smash one man back along the wall.

The man at the opposite side of the room was backing toward the door. Winton sent two shots that way and his Colt snapped empty. Splinters spurted from the log wall. The man clapped his hand to his cheek.

Winton leaped to the Mexican's curled body and snatched his gun from his holster. Paco suddenly shot out both feet. They took Winton in the chest, hurled him backward across the room. His head banged against the wall. A sheet of white light leaped across his vision, then blackness. He fought it.

He swayed toward the cursing gunman, who was in the doorway. He stumbled to his knees. He braced himself with one outflung hand and triggered shot after shot at his enemy. He didn't see the man buckle and pitch backward through the door.

When Winton regained consciousness, acrid powder fumes were still in the cabin. He lay upon his back. Someone held a bottle to his lips and he gulped the fiery liquor. He opened his eyes and saw Joyce's concerned face. Standing over him was Manda.

"Why did you kill our workmen?" she demanded, coldly angry.

Winton's own temper flared at her unjust accusation.

"No use tellin' yuh," he snapped. "Yuh wouldn't believe me."

"Dad, you'll have to report this trouble to Marshal Richman."

"I'll do that," Joyce agreed. "You'd best go along to the house."

She gave Winton another withering glance and hurried off. He sat up and looked about.

"What happened to the Mex?"

"He was gone when we got here." Joyce gave him a searching look. "They force yore hand?"

"They made the first play," Winton replied, and explained what had happened.

"I'd shore like to know what that Mex and his crew figgered to do?"

"Reckon there's one way to find that out," Winton said. "I'll tail the Mex."

"Won't do no good," Joyce growled. "He'll hunt cover till things quiet down, if he's comin' back."

Winton recalled the card the Mexican had been about to give him. He described it to the old miner. They spent several minutes searching for it without success.

"Yuh're mighty upset about a card," Joyce said.

"I believe that card would have tied Paco in with Longreen. Anyway, it's shore funny the Mexican can go giving men jobs when you say Longreen claims not to know him."

MANDA came through the door then. "Dad, haven't you gone yet?"

"On my way now," he said, and with Winton at his side, moved toward the stable. "I dunno what to tell Richman."

Winton had his own doubts about the marshal. It wouldn't do to be there when the lawman arrived.

"Just tell Richman I lit out after the shootin'. 'Course, I'll stick around and help yuh. I'll cut them king braces yuh showed me."

They shook hands, and the old miner went into the stable. Winton set about gathering what supplies he needed. He selected food from the bunkhouse stores. He didn't want to go to the house.

But, as he was starting out with his pack, Manda called to him. He went back to her. She gave him a compact bundle.

"I feed even a dog," she said, and marched back into the house.

He grinned to himself and hurried toward the thick stand of timber and brush along the creek. The starlight did not penetrate the gloom, and the darkness slowed his progress.

Before he reached a suitable place of concealment, he heard a body of horsemen splashing across the creek. The sounds diminished in the distance. As he stretched out to sleep, he hoped they would not discover his horse.

The birds awakened him. He ate the sandwiches Manda had prepared for him. Then, concealing his supplies in the bushes, he took up his rifle and ax, and moved to another part of the woods.

He worked as quietly as possible, for he knew, from the last few days' experience, that the marshal would keep posses out as long as he believed there was any possibility of capturing him.

That day passed without event. Winton did not leave his hiding place. The next morning he returned to his work. About mid-afternoon he noticed a great chattering and flying about of the birds. They were alarmed, but not by him.

Swiftly, he grabbed up ax and rifle and darted to a nearby thicket. On his stomach, he wormed his way under the tangle of green briars.

Marshal Richman abruptly stepped into sight. Behind him was Longreen. Several others followed them into the small clearing. One of them was Joyce.

"Jest like I told yuh," he said to the marshal. "The tree yuh saw shakin' was the one I started to cut down yesterday. Night came on before I finished."

Richman didn't say anything. He moved about, studying the ground. Longreen did likewise. They halted so close to Winton that he could have touched their boots.

"I think Joyce is lyin'," Longreen said. "We oughta beat the bush."

"Yuh can if yuh want," Richman said. "But I'm thinkin' Winton's not fool enough to hide in here. On top of that, my men need rest."

Longreen picked up one of the king braces Winton had cut and threw it into the brushes. It landed inches from the fugitive. He curled his finger around the trigger of his rifle. Another king pin crashed into Winton's place of concealment.

"Hey!" Joyce yelled angrily at Longreen. "Quit that! I worked mighty

hard cuttin' them braces!"

"I'll get 'em back," Longreen growled. He started into the brush clump. Briars bit his skin. He cursed and backed out.

Richman had already started off with his men. Longreen hurried after them.

WINTON let out a long breath of relief. He heard the posse ride away. Darkness found him on the edge of the wood. He made his way to the bunkhouse where he smelled the strong odor of tobacco. He stole around to the front and saw the old miner seated there. He joined him.

"What're yuh doin' down here?" he asked softly.

"Longreen's up at the house." Joyce puffed his pipe. "I was comin' for yuh in the mornin'. Richman thinks yuh've gone from the country. Better get some sleep. Hard day tomorrow."

The next morning Dal Winton went to work in the mine. He didn't like it, because he had a plainsman's dislike for the underground. But he had given his promise and kept at it.

This day, Joyce was mining a cut in preparation to shooting it down. To do this, it was necessary that he lay upon his side and dig horizontally across the base of the coal face. As he progressed deeper under the coal, he placed short logs, cut for this purpose, to prop up the coal. The brunt of the weight was usually taken on a king brace. Winton was making the vertical cut at the extreme left wall.

The ring of picks went on steadily. Racing against time as they were, there was no time to rest. Winton was deep in the vertical cut when he heard a slight crackling sound. He had been warned of such noises. He waited a moment, listening. The coal was walking!

"Get out, Joyce!" he shouted. "She's falling!"

He began to edge himself back out of the cut. He could hear the ring of the other man's pick. He turned his head and bellowed his warning. He could see the narrow space he occupied actually closing. His scalp prickled. Joyce's pick was silent now. And in that space was a crackling like that of a thousand tiny firecrackers.

The walls on both sides of Winton pressed in against him. Desperately, he fought to get free. He was blocked. He could go no farther. He braced himself and threw all his weight into the opening. The jagged projections of coal tore into his flesh.

"Joyce! Where are you?"

"It's no use, Dal," Joyce's shout came faintly. "I'm caught. The king brace slipped. Look out for Manda. The brace—"

A curse that was half-prayer rasped from Winton's throat. He didn't want the old man to die. He kept yelling to him:

"Hold on! I'm comin'!"

And all the time sweat poured into his eyes, his breath rasped from his lungs, and every inch of the way he fought toward freedom he left a little of his skin behind. He was less than a foot from the opening now. But it was so tiny, he didn't see how he'd ever get clear. He clawed and kicked, trying to force his body into a space too small for it. He only succeeded in wedging himself in so tightly that he could move in neither direction. Still he struggled.

Suddenly there was a pistol-like explosion, followed by a deep rumble. Winton's light went out. The breath went out of his lungs as a giant hand crushed at his chest. The coal shifted again. He gave his body a tremendous heave. It met no resistance. He was flung out.

He scrambled to his feet and lighted his lamp. In its glow he saw a work-roughened hand projecting from the coal. The whole cut had fallen upon Joyce. Winton grabbed up a pick and attacked the coal. Minutes passed. Sweat soaked his clothes. Still he

maintained his killing pace.

HE was suddenly conscious that someone was working beside him. He didn't stop until the old man's battered body was exposed. He scraped the sweat from his eyes and saw Manda bending over her father.

Winton touched her arm and gently lifted her erect.

"He's gone," she said piteously. She didn't cry, just stared at him with that hurt look in her eyes.

"I'll take you out," he said. "Then I'll bring him."

She shook her head dully. "I'll help."

He wisely let her have her way. They got Joyce free at last, dragged him out into the open. Winton saw then that the left hand was clamped around a piece of wood. The girl pried it loose.

"King brace," she said, looking up at Winton.

"Yes, he started to tell me something about it, but—"

"Look!" She pointed at the piece of brace.

Winton knew instantly that a wide wedge had been cut into the center of the brace, and then replaced so cleverly that it had escaped detection. He had cut those braces. Their eyes met, and he knew she was thinking of this, too. He didn't know how to stop it, or what to do.

He watched her go to the side of the room and dig for the braces he had partly covered with the coal that had crushed her father. She took a long time examining them. When she came back to him the smudges upon her face were like black upon pure white.

"Three more," she stated flatly.

He didn't say anything. She had made up her mind.

Grimly, he picked up her father's body and strode down the long black tunnel. Outside, she led the way into the house and wordlessly indicated that he was to lay the body in a wall bunk. She turned her back to him and said:

"I'll wait until dusk before I go after Marshal Richman."

Winton quietly went to the bunkhouse. He washed, donned his range garb, and strapped on his guns. He found his horse and rode to a nearby thicket from where he could watch the road. He meant to wait until dark, then go into town and see what he could discover.

Night was falling when he saw Manda ride toward town. He stayed there on the edge of the thicket until the gloom swallowed her. Then, as he turned back to get his horse, a rustling of the bushes arrested him. He crouched down and stared toward the sounds.

Paco, the Mexican, stepped into the clear, and, holding to the shadows, stole swiftly toward the bunkhouse. Winton followed close after him. Through a window he watched the Mexican light a candle and then, on hands and knees, begin to search the floor.

Winton thought of the kindly old miner who had been murdered, of Manda's disbelief in him. This Mexican knew something of the trouble plaguing the girl.

Dal Winton silently lifted the latch and stepped into the room.

"Lookin' for something?" Cold rage was in his voice.

Paco pushed to his knees. His hands inched toward his weapons.

Winton laughed mirthlessly. His Colts leaped to his hands. The Mexican blanched, and thrust his arms above his head.

"Turn around, Senor Paco."

WINTON stepped over behind the Mexican, deftly flipped weapons from holsters and tossed them through the open door. He jerked Paco around and rammed the Colt muzzle into his stomach.

"What're yuh doin' here?"

The Mexican's eyes glittered, and he smiled. He did not speak.

"Hombre, yuh figger yuh're safe, eh?" Winton asked softly. "Figger yore boss will get yuh clear of murder?"

Paco's smile was not so wide now. Still he said nothing.

"Remember them wedges yuh cut in the king braces? They'll hang you." Winton chuckled when he saw the man pale. His bluff was working. But he still lacked proof of the Mexican's guilt. "Thought I didn't know yuh done it, eh? I'll tell Richman all about it, soon as he gets here."

Winton deliberately turned his head. Paco's breath whistled through his teeth as he grabbed Winton's gun-hand and butted him in the chest. The blow carried Winton backward. With his free arm he locked the Mexican's head against his chest, then flung all his weight sideward.

They crashed to the floor. The pistol sailed out of Winton's hand. He had wanted that. He intended to whip the truth from Paco. But the Mexican had other ideas. Already his greater weight was atop Winton, and steel-like fingers squeezed his windpipe.

"The card," Paco panted. "Where ees eet? Say quickly, or I keel you."

Winton had his body arched now. He gave a mighty heave. Paco went over his head but was up again like a mountain cat. They came together with a thud. Fists drummed upon bodies.

Winton gathered himself. He threw a terrific blow against the man's jaw. Paco reeled back across the room, and slammed against the wall. Winton, panting for breath, was after him. Steel flashed in the failing light. It opened a path of pain down Winton's left forearm. He got one hand on the knife wrist and his arm about the man's powerful body.

Locked together, streaming sweat, both strained to bring the wicked blade into play. Slowly it turned toward Winton's body. His slashed arm was weakening. Abruptly he threw his weight backward. Then, as Paco braced against this, Winton surged in the opposite direction. At the same time, he gave the knife a mighty wrench. They smashed against the floor. He felt the blade slide into the Mexican's chest, below the heart. Winton rolled clear.

"Paco, yuh're cashin' in yore chips. Who sent yuh here? Why'd yuh want that card?"

"Boss wanted eet," Paco whispered. "He—he—" Blood bubbled over his lips and he died.

Winton stayed there on the floor, resting. Sick with pain, he felt the sticky warmth of blood on his arm. He got up and crossed to the bunks. He started to search for something with which to bind his wound when he heard horses in the yard. He hurried over to the window.

IN the faint light he made out Manda's lithe figure, and that of Longreen. She had returned too soon to have ridden into town. And where was Marshal Richman?

Winton hurried to the cabin-front, where light fell from one of the windows. He raised his eyes level with the sash. Longreen was seated across the room from Manda. A sneer twisted his lips as he said:

"Yuh can quit playin' yore game now. You haven't fooled me at all. Right from that day the posse was here, when I saw in yore face yuh was lying, I knew Winton was here. I know now that yuh're soft on him in spite of tryin' to tell yoreself yuh hate him. I made my plans accordingly."

"What do you mean?" she asked, white-faced.

"I sent the Mex out to drop Winton tonight, knowing he was too sweet on you to stray far away. He's probably got him right now. Marry me

and Winton *might* have a chance to escape."

Longreen abruptly crossed to the girl, who sprang to her feet. He grabbed her in his arms. She clawed and kicked like a bobcat. But he was a powerful man, and he crushed the breath from her. She lay gasping in his arms. Even then, as his hot breath fanned her cheek, she found the strength to claw his face.

"Let her go!"

Winton's flat, metallic command came from the doorway. Standing there, clothes torn, dirty, blood-smeared, he was an awesome figure. There was death in the cold set of his face and burning eyes. Longreen must have known it was for him, because he let his hands fall away from Manda.

She moved out of his arms and gave a glad cry. "Dal!"

He didn't take his stare from the man who had caused them so much suffering.

"Leave the room, Manda." Not waiting for her to obey, he continued: "Longreen, you're the one who framed Jim Murphy's killin' on me. I was secretly hired to keep order in the camp. Yuh wanted Murphy's job, wanted it so yuh could get Joyce's mortgage and force Manda to marry yuh. Yuh had Paco fix them accidents in the mine. Yuh figgered to kill me. But Joyce got it instead. Now, I'm gonna blast yuh."

A step sounded behind Winton. Richman's voice said: "Not so fast, Winton. I'm arrestin' Longreen for Jim Murphy's murder."

"The court'll turn him free," Winton snapped.

"No, it won't," Richman contradicted. "I got proof." He kept his Colt trained upon the railroad man and held a dirty name card up where Winton could see it.

" 'Longreen shot me'," Winton read. " 'Jim Murphy'." He slanted a glance at the lawman. "This is the card Paco

THE SPIRIT OF TEXAS

The peace that's come to Texas
Was won with work an' blood—
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Battlin' fire an' flood.

We're not as hard-bit as we were,
Those days of feuds and fears—
But if there's need, we'll fight again
Just like the pioneers!

—TEX MUMFORD

started to give me in the bunkhouse. You found it?"

"That's right. I reckon Paco planned to shake down his boss. He must've given yuh the wrong card by mistake. I searched his body and found a handful of cards jest like this one. He had a thrivin' business sellin' these cards. One of 'em would get a gent a soft job on the railroad. Reckon him and Longreen split on the money."

Longreen suddenly made a grab for his pistol. Manda's warning cry was almost simultaneous with the crack of Winton's fist on Longreen's jaw. Longreen went down like a poled ox.

Richman looked from the railroader's recumbent form to Manda, and murmured:

"The stake was worth the game, mister. But yuh oughta know luck is a lady, and will beat a crooked deck every time. The rope's waitin' for this varmint. I'll take him into camp. Good luck to yuh both."

The Gun-Slingin' Hombre Known as Four-Spot Hits the Owlhoot Trail for Vengeance

IN

SETTLED SCORE

An Action Yarn by GEORGE DRAYNE

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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MR. BOSTON SAYS: "RARE ENJOYMENT FOR YOU IN MY APRICOT NECTAR!"

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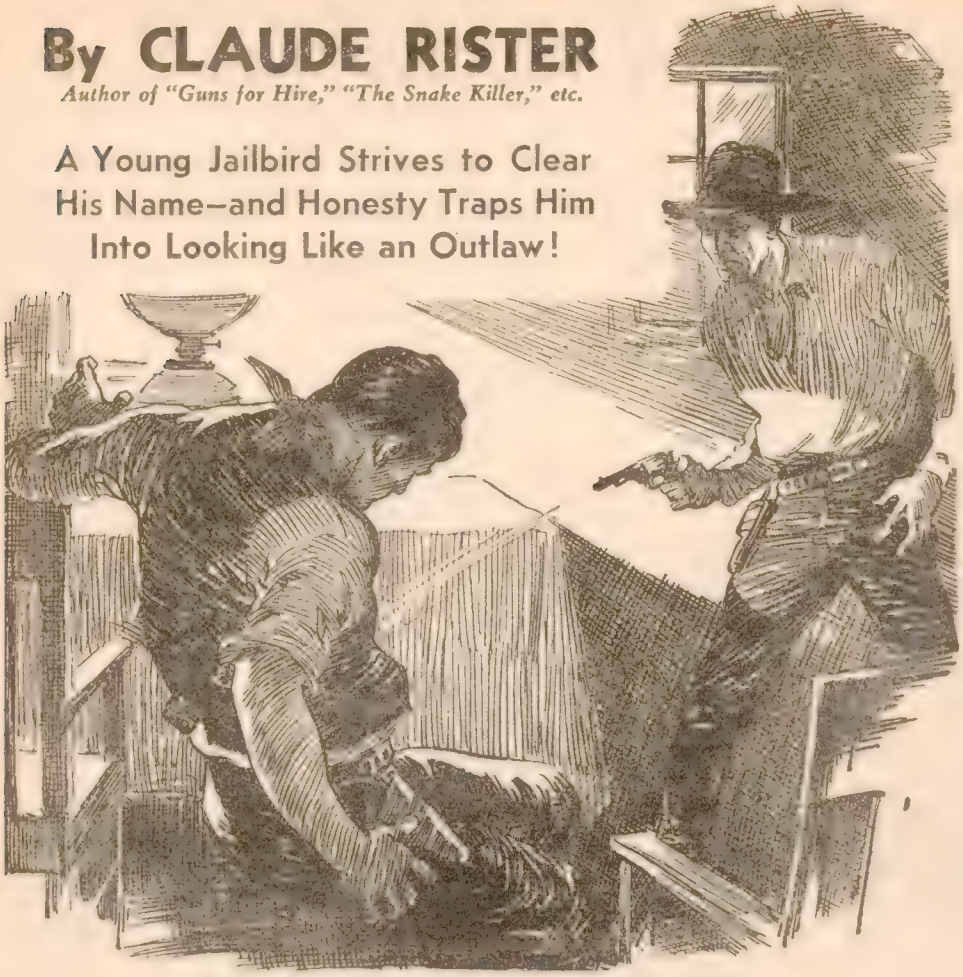
WHITE FURY

By CLAUDE RISTER

Author of "Guns for Hire," "The Snake Killer," etc.

A Young Jailbird Strives to Clear His Name—and Honesty Traps Him Into Looking Like an Outlaw!



The slick rancher fell flat with a slug in his shoulder

WHEN Ab Ledbetter rode out of some scrub growth, he stopped with a shock of surprise. Bern Sleeders and Sheriff Ed Reade were just leaving the Broken Wheel ranchhouse. He stared at them, overwhelmed by the unreasonable suspicion that those men were looking for him. But why? Did Sleeders hope to get him into trouble with the law? He and the rancher had hated each other almost from the moment of their first meeting a year ago.

Ab's first impulse was to turn back, with the thought of avoiding a meeting. He had pulled his mount to a stop on the trail. But the next instant his jaw set stubbornly and he was riding straight on. Hell, there was no reason why he should try to dodge anybody. He hadn't done anything wrong. Between gritted teeth, he muttered aloud:

"But damn that snake, he better not call me a jail-bird again!"

Sheriff Reade was a sandy-complexioned, heavily hewn fellow, gentle as a tame bull when not aroused. Bern Sleeders was just the opposite. He was slim, quick of movement and of eye, his hair mingled gray and black.

The three horses stopped pretty

much of their own accord. Ed Reade's saddle creaked as he shifted his huge weight, and the big officer greeted:

"Howdy, Ab."

"Hi, Sheriff." The cowboy did not speak to Bern Sleeders, did not even look at him. "What brings yuh up thisaway?"

"Hear tell that a certain wanted man is in the county. Seen any strangers around lately?"

"Nope, not a one."

"Big broad-shaped feller, low forehead, brindle eyes, heavy nose, surly temper and growling voice—" Ab kept shaking his head as the lawman gave the description. "Wanted for—" Reade drawled off a list of crimes, and ended with: "Hearn Jessup is the name. Ever hear of him?"

Young Ledbetter stabbed the lawman with an icicle look.

"No," he stated. "What makes yuh think I mighta?"

Ab knew the answer, despite Reade's gentle approach to the question. His father had been an outlaw, he had hidden out with the old gent in the mountains, and he had done time. Ab Ledbetter was touchy about his past, and he stiffened in the grip of bitterness now.

"We jest thought that mebbe while yuh holed up with old Caleb, or while yuh was in the pen you might've—" Bern Sleeders put in.

"That's plumb plenty!" Ab spat the words, and there was cold fire in his eyes as he stared at Sleeders. In a low, menacing voice, then, he warned: "I've told yuh twice already, if yuh don't stop yore slurs and callin' me a jailbird, some day I'll part yore hair if not yore skull with a forty-five caliber slug."

"Hold on, what kind of talk is that?" blustered Reade.

"I told yuh he's a bad hombre," declared the crafty Sleeders. "Don't let it slip yore mind that he was whelped by a lobo, and that he did time. Once a wolf, always a wolf. The poison in him will bust out in a rash some day."

AB'S square-hewn face had gone a little pale. Hoarsely, the cowboy ground out:

"Damn you, Sleeders, eat yore words or eat lead!"

He dropped a hand to his six-gun. Big Ed Reade suddenly became active. A gig of his spurs sent his mount jumping between the two potential combatants.

"Stop that!" he roared at Ledbetter as he crowded the cowboy's mount right off the trail. "Yuh better learn to bridle yore temper and yore gun, or yuh're shore gonna land right back behind bars. Now get on home."

For a moment their cold, savage eyes clashed silently, then Ab moved to obey the order. He wanted no trouble with the law. Besides, he liked Ed Reade. As he rode away he heard the sheriff's deep tones.

"And I want to tell you, Bern Sleeders—" The voice drifted into nothingness.

Bad egg—whelped by a lobo—jailbird—going to land back behind bars! Those words kept echoing through the cowboy's mind as he morosely jogged along.

Would such slurs always be spoken in connection with the name Ledbetter? Would people always consider him a potential outlaw just because his father had turned desperado? Was he never to be given a fair chance to prove that there was not and never had been any wolf instinct in his heart? His conscience was clear. He felt no crawling sense of shame for having done time. The law had sent him up merely as a schooling measure.

His father, a reckless and fiery man, had gone loco and shot it out with an overbearing sheriff. That killing had made the elder Ledbetter an outlaw. Ab had holed up with him for nearly two years. Then one night a posse had closed in on the mountain cabin.

Old Caleb had elected to shoot it out. He had ordered his son to serve as reloader for him, and the fourteen-year-old boy had obeyed mechanically. When the lawmen finally crashed in, they had found the outlaw badly wounded but still full of fight. Ab was crouching beside a pile of ammunition, stuffing cartridges into a Colt .45.

After Caleb's funeral, the law had sent Ab away to the State reform school. There he had stayed until he was eighteen. Five years ago he had returned to the old home range. He had wanted to prove to himself and to the world that he could make good in the very community which had declared him an embryo outlaw.

The going had been tough, but Old Clevice Jenkins had been good to him. The Broken Wheel owner had given him a job and had taught him to be a good cowpuncher. In this bitter moment, though, Ab wondered if Jenkins didn't also have misgivings concerning him. He wondered if his employer would trust him with any grave responsibility which required absolute honesty.

He left his mount at the gate and walked into the sun-baked little ranchhouse. Ab was the only hired hand there. He was a strongly built, serious-faced cowpuncher, aged by adversity beyond his twenty-three years.

Clevice Jenkins was a wiry old man with hair, mustache, goatee and eyes that all seemed silvery. A week ago a horse had fallen on him and broken his right leg. He sat in a rocking-chair now, his heavily bandaged leg propped up on a pillowed stool.

"I met up with Reade and Sleeders," the cowboy stated tonelessly as he straddled a chair. I shore was surprised to see that crooked rancher here, after his dirty cattle deal."

CLEVICE JENKINS explained while stuffing a pipe with twist: "Bein' as the sheriff was comin' to the Broken Wheel, Sleeders used him as personal bodyguard and legal representative. I jest been notified that Bern wants immediate payment of his demand note."

Ab's face went even grimmer. Six months ago Bern Sleeders, a comparative newcomer to that country, had sold Jenkins one hundred head of cattle at what had seemed a bargain price. The old Broken Wheel owner had paid part cash and given a demand note for the balance. The seller had been crafty enough not to take a lien on the cattle themselves, but on the ranch.

Jenkins had thought himself perfectly safe in the deal, since he was confident he could almost double his money on the resale. Soon, however, it had been discovered that the herd was stricken with blackleg. Subsequently all but a few of the cattle had died.

Sleeders had been called to account, but he had stoutly declared that he had sold only clean animals. He claimed that the cattle had become infected with the dread disease after transfer to the Broken Wheel range. Ab and the slick rancher had almost gun-fought on that occasion, for the waddy had been quick to take his boss's part. Now what was the game? The cowhand did not know, for he was not a tinhorn lawyer.

"I thought he made yuh a promise off paper to give yuh at least another year, mebbe longer," growled Ab.

Clevice Jenkins nodded. "He did, but I reckon he plumb forgot it. The note allows me three days' grace, but unless I pay after that's up, he can close me out."

"The dirty skunk, jumpin' onto yuh while yuh're down! He knows that with yore broke leg and injured back, yuh can't get into town for the money—even if yuh got it banked."

"I ain't got more'n half that money, son. Likewise, I don't have no cattle I can sell, what with the few I got left

bein' under this strict quarantine."

"And yuh can't get out to round up any help from yore friends. The rattler sure has got his fangs into yuh."

"I ain't licked yet! Figgerin' he's all set to grab off this little ranch, Bern Sleeders has overlooked two bets of mine. I still got Rocket and I still got you!"

The cowboy's eyes opened wider. Rocket was a two-year-old gelding that Jenkins had bought from a breeder of race stock. He had raised the gelding from a colt. Adversity had forced the aged rancher to sell off nearly everything else that could be turned into any appreciable amount of quick money. But he still owned Rocket.

"What do yuh mean?" the cowpuncher inquired.

"Ace Devaney, over beyond the mountains, has made me a standin' offer of twelve hundred dollars for Rocket. I want yuh to take the hoss over there right away, sell him and bring the money to me pronto. . . . Yeah, I know. I hate to give up Rocket, but after all, that's what I bought him for—to raise into a fine hoss and then sell for a big profit. Now I can't afford to keep an investment like him around any longer. Besides, he's my only out—him and you."

Ab left the old rancher a few minutes later and went out to make ready for his trip. His heart was pounding with conflicting emotions. The old bitter grimness was gone from his face and he was eager, almost smiling. His usually half-longing, half-defiant hard eyes were suspiciously filmed. The boss believed in him, was trusting him to the limit! It made him feel clean and strong to know that someone had faith in his character.

"I'll shore go far as I can for him!" the grateful cowboy muttered. "I'll sell the race horse and bring the money back to him safe and sound, even if I have to shoot my way into Sycamore and return. Jest let anybody try to stop me! But I'd shore enjoy tokin' the *dinero* to Sleeders and shovin' it down his throat with my six-gun, a dollar-bill at a time."

ACE DEVANEY owned Sycamore's most palatial amusement emporium. He was out of town when Ab Ledbetter reached there, and the cowboy chafed while waiting. The grace period allowed by the demand note was swiftly running out.

When Ace did return, he was somewhat dubious about dealing with Ab Ledbetter. He studied the bill of sale and old Clevice Jenkins' accompanying letter. He eyed Ab sharply, asked many pointed questions. The waddy frequently went red under the cold scrutiny and the ruthless interrogation. He knew what the gambler was thinking, and he was bitter and impatient.

"Well," he snapped finally, "do yuh want the horse or should I lead him back to the Broken Wheel? I can't kill any more time around here."

"Mosey over to the bank with me," Ace quietly suggested.

He gave the bill of sale and the letter to the banker for examination. He did it openly, with no pretense at subtlety. The banker called over his two tellers and the three men studied the papers together. Now and then they looked sharply and suspiciously at the messenger, and questioned him. Finally the consensus was that the writing and the signature were undoubtedly authentic.

"But I don't know what on earth Jenkins means, takin' such a chance," mumbled the banker.

Ab Ledbetter was cold with anger when he strode out of the bank with twelve hundred dollars under his woolen shirt. His ire was soon forgotten, however, for he had to think of getting back to the Broken Wheel at the earliest possible moment. Not much of the grace period remained.

Ab knew that if he took the cus-

tomary route—the trail around the point of Grayback Mountain—he would not arrive home in time to pay Sleeders. He therefore decided to take a short-cut through the mountains. He knew the rough country up there, since he traveled within its vastnesses for two years with his outlaw father. The going would be tough, but if he went by way of Deadman's Pass, he should be able to arrive home with time to spare.

But he had not counted on the freakish mountain weather. It had been clear and snappy when he left Sycamore, but he had scarcely more than begun his climb before a blizzard set in.

It increased in violence until within an hour it was swirling about the lone traveler in blinding white fury. Ghostly dervishes whirled across rugged slopes, through miniature dells, teetered crazily along ledges and precarious mountain trails. A thousand banshees screamed through the black, stunted timber and among fanglike rocks. Mingled sleet and snow stung the rider's face, until he pulled the brim of his Stetson lower and his neckerchief higher.

His mount's ears lay back, its eyes half-closed against the fierce wind. At first the mane and tail flew wildly, but after awhile they became so matted with ice that they hung like festoons of glass.

The nature-made trail that Ab was following wriggled slowly along the east mountainside, leading on toward Deadman's Pass. He knew that up at the deep notch it bent sharply, met the western slope, then slanted away southward just as it had ascended, gradually twisting among rocks and scrub trees.

TWILIGHT began to gloom the mountain wilderness, but the fury of the blizzard continued unabated. A night of confusing white and black came on. Man and mount were ghost creatures now, moving slowly through the storm.

In another hour, the wind began dying. It came only in fierce, prolonged gusts, as if some wounded monster were venting its rage and fury in waning gasps. It still was snowing steadily, however, though no longer in stinging blasts. There was a continuous feathery swarm of flakes that blurred all objects to indistinctness.

Ab's mount suddenly flopped sideward. Its feet had flown from under it as if jerked by mighty hands. The animal slid, whirled, tearing up a spray of snow. At the foot of the slope it lodged against two crags. From where he lay, still clinging to the saddle, Ab could look down into a yawning, black crevasse. He shuddered, and not entirely from cold.

The horse was floundering in an attempt to get up. Ab quieted it, pulled himself free of the kak, assisted the animal to rise. Drifted snow had kept the rider's pinned leg from being seriously hurt. Ab limped only slightly as he led the horse carefully along the slope and back to the trail.

The fall had been a warning. He might not be so fortunate in another one, and there was still more difficult going ahead. He decided to camp and wait for the storm to clear. Even if he had to wait until morning before proceeding, he would still have time to reach the Broken Wheel before the deadline.

He found a little flat on the mountainside and there drew to a halt. Barren cliffs frowned down from three sides. He dismounted in a sheltered place, unsaddled his horse, found some dry wood and made a big fire.

There in that lonely mountain spot he prepared a meal from provisions he had brought along. Among crags and crevices, gust of wind wailed mournfully. Flakes of snow zig-zagged like bewildered butterflies through the ring of firelight. Flames leaped and

crackled, their soft glow playing lambently against striped rock walls and among stubby pines. The atmosphere immediately about them was rich with the aroma of sizzling bacon and boiling coffee.

Young Ledbetter ate hungrily, warmed his frozen insides with hot, black coffee. Then he sat hunched beneath an overhang of granite and stared into the flames while smoking a quirly.

He was back in the old mountain wilderness after all the years, but under what different circumstances! The spirit of his father seemed to be near, hovering just beyond the firelight, moaning in the trees, whispering in the brush. Well, the son was making amends for the father. He would soon prove to the world that there was no lobo blood in his veins!

There was a great swell of gratitude in his heart as he thought once more of old Clevice Jenkins' kindness and trust. Ab swore that if need be, he would die for Clevice. He would shoot his way through hell to get back to his employer with the redemption money.

The fire burned low. The waddy's rugged face was like old bronze in the faint light. Suddenly his head came up, and with held breath he listened. The wind had ceased. The night was clogged with drifting flakes. The whole world seemed clutched by a vast silence. Then he heard the crunching of snow beneath hoofs. The sound was faint, but Ab's sense of hearing was acute as a wolf's that tense night.

His right hand dropped, half drew his six-gun. As motionless as the bench of rock on which he sat, he listened. Through his mind whirled fear for the money strapped beneath his shirt.

THE soft tramping had stopped. Ab's mount snorted gently. Out in the night a horse whickered. The sound broke off abruptly, as if the animal had been jerked. Then the crunching of snow resumed. The rider was briskly approaching the camp-site now. Ab rose silently, slid along a wall of stone and into a shallow niche.

A muffled rider materialized from the gloom and stopped. He was like a blurred wraith there in the dense snowfall. For an instant, Ab Ledbetter had the eerie feeling that the spirit of his father had indeed come to camp with him this weird night. The next moment the awful sensation was dispelled by a hoarse voice.

"Hello there, pilgrim!"

Ab surmised that he had been seen. That was why he called back:

"Howdy, stranger."

Then he realized that he hadn't been seen, for the rider's head jerked slightly. Realizing the uselessness of trying to hide further, Ab moved slowly toward the light. The horseman edged closer, too.

"Saw the play of fire agin the bluffs, and she shore looked good. Mind if I camp with yuh till this damned blizzard eases up? I'm out of matches my own self."

Ab had neither the heart nor the right to say no. It was free country. Already the visitor had dismounted, was reaching for the latigo strap.

"Shelter yore b r o n c alongside mine," the cowboy invited. "I'll shove on the coffee-pot and slice some bacon."

The presence of the stranger made him uneasy. Ab resolved to keep as alert as a hawk, every instant. His coat was tucked down between his chaps and his six-gun, leaving the jutting cedar butt clear for a quick draw. The man talked in a muffled voice through his overcoat collar, while unsaddling and sheltering his mount.

"Yuh can jest call me Lige. I'm from the other slope. Been doin' some prospectin' hereabouts. Plumb careless of me to leave camp today with-

out more matches. Who are yuh, cowboy, and where yuh from?"

Ab told him the truth, but Lige seemed scarcely interested. He came back and squatted beside the revived fire. When he spread his hands to the warmth, Ab had a good view of him.

He was of medium build. His face was weather roughened, covered with a stubble of beard. His eyes were the narrowest slits Ab ever had seen. The man grinned almost continually, showing gapped and tobacco-stained teeth.

"A hard-lookin' customer," thought the cowboy, and resolved once more to keep on his guard constantly. He walked to his horse, buried his rifle in the snow to keep it from being stolen.

Hunched on his big roweled spurs, Lige ate and smacked and loudly supped coffee. Later he sank back against his saddle beneath the overhang and lighted a cigarette. He talked almost continuously, in a rambling manner. Now and then he got up, walked out into the open, looked up and all around and commented on the weather.

Ab sat tensely on a small rock, taciturn, inscrutable. In his mind he had compared his unwelcome guest with Sheriff Reade's description of the wanted outlaw, but the two did not agree. This man could not be Hearn Jessup.

The night was growing late. Once more the fire had burned low. Ab decided to rebuild it and then turn in. He would not sleep a wink, though. He would just lie beneath his cover, a drawn gun in hand.

He and Lige stepped into the open together. Again the stranger looked at the heavens. Never fully taking his eyes from the man, Ab gathered up an armful of wood and tossed it onto the fire. Instantly a large blaze sprang up.

"She's clearin' up!" Lige whooped delightedly. "The clouds 're busted and the stars is peepin' through. I can get on my way now."

Ab glanced upward. Stars were indeed showing fleetingly. He was glad, for as soon as he had got rid of the stranger, he would also be on his way. Then suddenly his nerves began singing an alarm.

Out in the darkness a voice had snarled loudly:

"Hands up, cowboy!"

AB'S head jerked. Dimly blurred against a background of white loomed the crouched figure of a man. In a single flash of thought Ab figured that the two riders had come up the trail together. They had not wanted to attempt a robbery before the storm had abated sufficiently for them to travel on in safely. They had not wanted to run a needless risk of getting shot, so one man had stayed out in the night, awaiting a propitious moment to make a bloodless coup.

But they had not reckoned on the cowboy's nerve, and his almost fanatical loyalty to old Clevice Jenkins. Instead of obeying the shouted command, Ab leaped aside, his hand streaking like lightning for his six-gun.

Two guns blazed in the night, their flames burning holes in the gloom and flashing dimly on the carpet of snow. Ab heard a slug shrill past his face, then a sharp curse out in the darkness. He slipped and went down. As he made a twisting fall, he saw that Lige had drawn a pistol and was swinging its muzzle toward him. Then his head struck a rock and his eyes seemed to explode.

As he strove dazedly to sit up, a human bulk hurled him back. Lige tore his gun away, dealt him a stunning blow. The next instant both robbers were kneeling beside the prone victim. Eagerly their hands tore open his coat, leather jacket and woolen shirt.

"I bashed him cold," grunted Lige.

But he was wrong. Ab had twisted his head slightly and the blow had

glanced off against his left shoulder. Even now he was dimly conscious of what the robbers were doing and saying.

"There!" breathed Lige as he jerked free the stuffed money belt.

"Look at that, Hearn!"

The second man was Hearn Jessup!

"Yeah. Good pickin's. Let me heft it."

"What do yuh say we keep it all? Mebbe we oughta ride south and not go back to Sleeders' place a-tall."

Sleeders was behind the robbery!

"Nope. We gotta hide out for awhile. Besides, he aims to cut us in on some other jobs. Bash that waddy a coupla more times jest to make sure of him. Then— Hell!"

Ab had wrenched aside quickly and sent a hand darting for the pistol butt which curved from Lige's right coat-pocket. He got hold of it, but so did the outlaw. They scrambled erect, fighting furiously.

Lige was cursing like a wild man. Hearn Jessup was shouting, leaping crazily back and forth, trying to get a crack at Ab with his gun barrel. He dared not shoot for fear of killing his partner. Snow flew and frozen brush crashed. In his left hand, Jessup held the dangling money belt.

In their terrific struggle, the two locked men whirled and stomped swiftly farther and farther away from the campfire. Now they were at the brink of a slope. Out went their boots from under them. In a flash Lige saw that they were scooting toward a precipice, and he let out a yell. Each man loosed his hold of the other and strove to get a grip on something.

Ab whirled half-around and fell into a slight crevice. Lige bounced over him, went hurtling on. A cascade of snow, started by the falling bodies, gushed over Ledbetter and covered him lightly.

He heard a screaming howl of mortal terror, fading swiftly, and knew that Lige had gone over the cliff.

THE cowboy was about to sit up when he heard an exclamation. Instantly he realized that Jessup had arrived at the rim of the little slope. There was a distant smashing thud. Lige had struck the rocks. After a moment's silence, Jessup breathed a hoarse curse. His heavy footsteps went crunching away. Plainly he believed that both men had plunged to death.

Ab lay perfectly still until he heard fading hoofbeats. Then he reared to a sitting position in the crevice. Sharply he looked around for his gun, or Lige's, but he saw neither. Doubtless the bandit had taken both weapons over the precipice with him.

It was a dangerous job, getting back onto the mountain flat. But Ab accomplished it by using his heavy-bladed knife to help him crawl along. The moon was shining in momentary triumph, its cold light glinting on a lonely, deserted scene.

Ab hurried to his equipment and slipped his rifle from its boot. Then he shouldered the equipment and went to the shelter where he had left his horse. There he met with a stunning discovery. The animal lay dead, shot above the left eye! Ab realized with a sinking heart that Hearn Jessup's single bullet had drilled the horse by accident, after missing its human target.

Ab slumped down upon the dead body and bit his cold, chapped lips in despair. Gloom descended over him. The moon and the stars had suddenly vanished from the heavens, and the light of hope had also been swept from his heart.

Jessup had taken Lige's mount along with him, leaving Ab stranded in that mountain wilderness. As the cowboy's spirit plunged deeper and deeper into the black pit of hopelessness, he thought bitterly of the effect of the news when it would reach the home range. Some people would hint that he probably had stolen the money

himself. Others would simply lift their eyebrows knowingly. He would be able to prove nothing against Bern Sleeders.

Clevice Jenkins would be closed out long before Ab could get back to the Broken Wheel. He had failed the boss — failed him miserably! Ab almost wished he had been shot.

Suddenly he had an inspiration. He had learned to be quite expert with snow-shoes during his two years of hiding out with old Caleb. It had been a long time ago, but he could try!

Feverishly he set to work. With green boughs, fresh horsehide and saddle strings, he fashioned a pair of webs. He dug up his rifle and strapped it across his back, took a pair of balancing sticks and set out to climb over the mountain. If he could make it, he might be able to get ahead of Jessup on the long, hairpin trail beyond.

It was clumsy work at first, but the knack soon came back to him. Doggedly, driven by a fierce determination, he struggled on and on. A dozen times he teetered on dizzy brinks. Time and again he took hard falls. On the crest he encountered a wind that almost swept him over a precipice. But at last he was over the crest. Now began the dangerous descent.

Panting, quivering with near-exhaustion, he finally stood on the trail. He could have shouted for sheer joy when he saw that there were no tracks in the snow. He peered along the twisting mountain ramp, then slunk quickly into cover and shook off the wrecked webs. Dimly he could see a black shadow that was moving down-trail.

AB let Jessup get nearly abreast of him before he stepped into the open and barked:

"Halt and lift!"

The rider jerked to a stop. He cursed in amazement as he recognized the man on the ground. Then he flung himself down, stabbed with his spurs and yanked free a gun. Ab fired without the slightest compunction.

As riflefire slashed the gloom, Jessup's right leg flung up and he pitched off sideward. He slid to a stop in the snow. Begging for mercy, he began getting up slowly. His left hand was pressed to his right breast and blood was seeping through the clutching fingers. Ab quickly disarmed the man and made him captive.

When the cowboy had recovered his money belt, he questioned Jessup. But he could get no information from the sullen prisoner. He swiftly mounted, took the other horse in tow and set off down the trail.

At sunup, he was approaching the Sleeders ranchhouse. From the brush he had seen the owner puttering about the house corral. Keeping the house between himself and the corral, Ab came up and left the two horses close to the east wall. The bound prisoner was tied to his mount and gagged.

Ab Ledbetter was sitting on a table edge, swinging one boot and twirling a six-gun when Sleeders entered. The rancher started violently, stared, then blurted:

"What the hell are you doin' here?"

With the gun muzzle, Ab tapped a stack of bills.

"I'm pickin' up the boss' demand note. There's the *dinero*. Count it and hand over the paper."

He slid away from the table and waited. Sleeders sat down. With trembling fingers he dazedly counted the money, then opened a drawer ostensibly to get the note. But a pistol suddenly jumped into view.

Thunder shook the room. The slug in his right shoulder knocked Sleeders flat. Ab sprang to him, kicked the gun skittering away, and yanked him to his feet. With his own face thrust to within a few inches of the cattleman's pale features, the cowboy grated out the whole story. Sleeders tried to bluff, but it was no use. He wilted

when Ab shoved him to a window and pointed to the bound prisoner.

At that moment they heard the pattering of hoofs. Prodding his captive along before him, Ab hurried to the front door. A deputy sheriff was coming up briskly, a rifle balanced across his saddle. Ab called a greeting, then herded his prisoner out and explained all that had happened.

"Looks like Sleeders musta knowed the two jiggers in another country," he concluded. "Reckon they spied on the Broken Wheel to see what we aimed to do about that demand note. When I set out with Rocket in tow, Sleeders sent the two gunnies to follow me."

"Reade was suspicious of Sleeders," the deputy said. "He sent me out to look his place over again this mornin'. You'll be collectin' some nice reward money for them other two snakes, cowboy."

YOUNG Ledbetter's eyes were half-closed, and there was a queer, satisfied little smile on his lips as he replied:

"Just have the check made out to Clevice Jenkins. It'll help to pay part of his loss in them blackleg cattle that Sleeders sold him. I've already had my reward."

There would be no more slurs, no more lifting of eyebrows, no more being looked upon with distrust. Ab Ledbetter, son of Caleb Ledbetter, had proved himself to the community and to his old rancher friend.

His reward was indeed richer than mere gold.

FOLLOW THE POWDERSMOKE TRAIL OF KEITH LANE

in

MUSTANG VALLEY FEUD

Next Issue's Featured Novel

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GUN MAGIC

By MICHAEL McQUILLEN

Author of "Ghost Valley War," "The Fiddlin' Waddy," etc.

Forced to Throw Lead With a Demon Shot, Rannihan Hal Burton Invents a Little Six-Gun Sorcery That Is All His Own!

SI HARTLER bowed his grizzled head meekly, turned toward the entrance of the tent—and suddenly whirled back, centered his six-guns on Hal Burton, thumbed hammers. The old trail-boss' jaw wobbled some, yet his hands were steady as rocks. It had been a mighty long time since Hartler had been forced to throw down on a man. And this Hal Burton ranny was like a son to him.

But men sort of blow up when they're under a strain. And the pitiful bellowing of the herd outside was enough to drive any real cattleman loco. For four days, on the long drive across the Powder Desert, those dogies hadn't tasted a drop of water. Harg Veen's dynamite and his poison, had dried up or ruined every waterhole along that blazing hot trail. And now, with the herd at the east portal of the gap and the roaring streams of Gunsight Valley within a few hours' drive, the herd was stopped.

Burton pumped slugs into the outlaw's body

Harg Veen had blocked the gap.

Old Si Hartler swallowed hard and glared at Burton defiantly.

They'd come a long way, these two, against top-heavy odds. They'd built up a spread of their own. The sale of this trail-herd beef, in the little town of Gunsight Gap, would put their little outfit on its feet. And now Harg Veen had them nailed to the wall, was demanding ten dollars a head to let the herd pass through the gap.

"Yuh ain't goin' out there!" Hartler yelled. "Yuh'd just get yoreself shot, the same as all the other gents that tried to go up against Veen. I'm tellin' yuh, that gent's plain poison! He's—"

Hal Burton looked down at the muzzles of the old gent's unwavering sixes, grinned gently, and started moving forward, pace by pace.

"Get back," the oldster warned. "Fer once, I'm layin' down the law! Anybody with a lick of sense'd rather tangle with a sawmill than with Harg Veen. Look at the gents he's gunned down—some of the fastest gun-slingers in the country. They go out to face him, an' later on they're found, deader'n mutton, bullet holes pepperin' their bellies and their backs. It's plumb onnatural, son—that sidewinder Veen must have some of magic in his guns, because he never gits even a scratch."

Smiling gently, Hal Burton jammed his lean body against the old-timer's guns, turned them aside.

"Hell!" Hartler said, slumping. "Even a gun-bluff don't spook yuh none."

"I know you wouldn't gun me," Burton said, stalking past his partner.

"Son! Let me go along."

"No! There's only two of us—an' one has to stay here with the herd. After all, Harg Veen ain't but one hombre, an' I can—" Burton hesitated.

"Hell!" Hartler exploded, holstering his guns. "He must be a dozen, the way he kills. Son, I'm beggin' yuh not to—"

THE young cattleman shook his head.

"I got to go," Burton said. "If we try to dry-drive these dogies back across the desert, they'll mighty near all die on our hands. You look after the herd, Si." Burton shook hands with the older man, then swung into the saddle of his pinto. "Don't you worry, now," he said, reining away. "Veen works alone, an' I'm bettin' there's no magic hooked up with his guns, either."

"Yeah?" the old-timer called as a parting shot. "Shore Veen works alone—that's because his own kind knows better'n to come near him."

Burton worked around the bellowing, frantic steers which were jammed into the rock-walled portal. It was a tough job, but the cowman finally reached the heavy pole barricade which Harg Veen had placed across the gap. He dismounted, managed to get the pinto headed back along the rock wall and slapped the animal's side.

"Git movin'!" Burton said grimly. "I'll be needin' yuh no more, for a while. Either I'll git myself a wooden overcoat, in a minute or two—or else I'll git this barricade tore down!"

Jostled by the maddened dogies, Burton climbed the pole barricade. The pressure of the herd had bowed the stout poles; and the wood groaned under the strain. But Harg Veen had spent considerable time on this barricade, and it would hold for quite a while.

Burton landed in the dust of the other side of the barricade. And with a small hatchet he had brought along, he went to work.

He had struck just four blows with the hatchet when Harg Veen's rasping voice roared.

"You, Burton?"

The cattleman whirled, but nobody was in sight.

Veen's voice cut loose again.

"You brung my money?"

From wherever he was hiding, Veen had the drop. So Hal Burton was wary.

"Reckon we can't pay what yuh ask," he called.

Veen's evil laugh echoed between the rock walls of Gunsight Gap.

"Want I should come down an' palaver, huh? Maybe yuh figger to get me out in the open, huh? Well, here I come, ranny! Git yoreself set!"

Burton clamped his jaws together. Bronzed, hardened by years of range work until his muscles were like tense coils and his nerves were like wires. Plenty of gents had faced Harg Veen's guns—and not one had lived to talk about it! And Hal Burton had to face him here and now. Everything Burton and his old partner had worked and slaved for was at stake.

Burton tried hard to keep from thinking about the gun-swift gents who had gone down under those uncanny guns of Harg Veen. But he just couldn't help it, somehow.

There was Sheriff Allen, faster on the draw than any man on two legs. Allen had answered Veen's challenge—and Allen had been found with his body bullet-riddled. There were plenty more who had struck the same sort of a setup. And every time Veen arranged things so that he and his victim were alone. And each and every time it was Veen who was the victor.

Now, Veen was inching around the base of a huge boulder, a hundred yards away.

Burton had seen the gent before but now Veen looked even more deadly than ever. A towering giant with a dark, evil face. The man wore a huge black sombrero, and in the shadow of its brim lurked eyes that were like malignant, cruel stars.

HARG VEEN packed two guns—old-model smokepipes with huge bores and barrels half as long as a rifle. But they seemed strange weapons for a quick-draw artist.

"Lessee yore money!" Veen demanded, warily. "If yuh ain't got it git away from that fence before I blow yuh apart!"

Hal Burton crouched.

"Come ahead!" he invited.

"Salty, huh?" Veen barked. "Where's that pardner of yores?"

"Back at camp," Burton retorted.

"Yuh've got to git them steers to the rails by tomorrow, or lose the deal." Veen chuckled. "This here is the only way yuh can git the herd through to Gunsight—an' I've yuh over a barrel. Pay up! Or else give me a bill of sale to them dogies!"

"Not on yore life!" Burton retorted. "Do yore shootin', coyote."

With a hitching, clumsy movement, Veen dragged his long smokepipes from leather.

The awkward slowness of that draw startled Hal Burton. Veen was much too far away for short-gun shooting, even with those long-barreled sixes. Yet the man was firing. Bullets wailed past Burton. Suddenly, Burton was answering Veen's shots. The young cattleman grinned happily.

Burton's guns had hardly finished belching smoke when the outlaw jerked, buckled at the middle. Clutching wildly at his body with hands which still gripped his guns, Veen screamed. Then he went down in a twisting sprawl, squirmed and then lay still.

Suddenly, Burton uttered a cry of mortal agony, which began just after Veen started to buckle. He dropped his guns, fell heavily into the dust.

There was a long, stretched-out silence, during which the echoes of the gunfire beat themselves out against the rock walls.

Sprawled and seemingly lifeless, Hal Burton was tensely alert. His sombrero was tilted across his head, so that he could open his eyes and watch Veen without having the outlaw see that he was doing so.

After five minutes, the outlaw stirred. He had fallen so that one of his guns lay across the crook of his arm. Then Harg Veen opened fire.

The slug struck thirty feet ahead of Hal Burton. But the cowman made no move. Veen fired again. Satisfied that his victim was dead, Veen got cautiously to his feet, lumbered forward cautiously. In Veen's evil face there was a kind of puzzled incredulity. He kept his guns ready, thumbs on the hammers.

Holding himself as rigid as tempered steel, Hal Burton waited.

When the outlaw was twenty feet away, Hal Burton's muscles let go like springs. He grabbed the guns which he had dropped, bounded to his feet, so fast his hat fell off, thumbed the hammers—all in one lightning-fast move.

(Concluded on page 125)

WATCH FOR THE
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EXCITING COMICS

ONE WAS WRONG

By LEN HARDY

Author of "The Comeback," "This Was Mine," etc.

They had to shoot their way through two passes

It Took Riding the Lawless Vengeance Trail to Teach Cal Pearson the Real Difference Between Right and Wrong!

HE hoped they would hear his horse's hoofs through the din of the storm. They did and they came to the door of the ranch-house and threw it open. Bleary-eyed he saw them there—all four of them. Friends or foes? Foremost in the light framing the open doorway, blinking out into the black, pouring night, stood big Jim Blye. Right behind him was the young towhead, Earl Munson, taking up the rest of the lighted space.

On her toes behind the two men and peering over their shoulders was Ann Blye, with her waving black hair and her cool, gray eyes—though the stranger was not making out the color of hair and eyes at that moment. And deeper in the room, with a hand resting on the back of a chair, stood the mother of Ann and Jim, "Mom" Blye, her silver hair gleaming as it caught the rays of the light.

That was how he saw them for the first time, the warmth of their happy shelter making him feel his own chills and wetness and aches all the more.

He swayed on his mount, unable to gather up the strength to dismount,

unable to utter a word. He knew that those in the house had not seen him sway. Not much can be seen when stepping out of a good light into pitch-darkness and heavy rain.

"Hi, Pilgrim!" greeted Jim Blye.

But the rider could not answer. He felt himself beginning to slip, and for a moment it seemed that his eyeballs were turning up in their sockets, as the eyes of men do when they die. A flash of blinding lightning did not hurt his eyes. He heard running feet, knew that somebody had at last seen his condition, and was coming to him on the run.

He felt a pair of strong arms around his body, and knew he must have slipped off his horse.

They made a bed for him quickly. One glance had shown he was not wounded. The towhead turned a flask down over his mouth and the strong stuff gave him some strength, so that at last he could talk.

He told them he was sick—might be pneumonia. They did not even ask him his name. The tow-headed Earl Munson offered to ride to town for the doc, but Jim Blye took over that chore himself. As he buckled on his holster he was saying:

"No reason why yuh can't stay with Mom and Ann. Yuh come to visit. I'll be back with Doc Jensen in less'n an hour."

Ann saw the stranger slipping into unconsciousness again, and quickly she came to him with vinegar and rubbed his wrists, painting his nostrils with some of the stuff.

"Better you run a towel over him, Earl," she said. "He must be wet, what with rain and fever. Rub him brisk."

AND they pulled him through. He didn't know how long he had been there, until one morning with the sun streaming in through a window of his big bedroom, he asked them. Eight days. The worst was over. He must have come to them on the fourth or fifth day of his pneumonia. He knew that he had been sick several days before coming. His mind was clear enough to realize that they didn't even know his name. He was talking to them, slowly, weakly, and they tried to stop him.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm takin' it easy. My name is Cal Pearson."

"Hush!" Ann soothed softly, and ran a hand over his forehead, pushing stray hair out of his eyes. "This is the time you have to be most careful, take it easiest—just when you're beginning to feel better. We're not going to have any relapse." She stopped him as he tried again to speak. "Be a good boy, Cal, and do as you're told. There will be plenty time to talk, later."

He wondered what they had been thinking all these days, and long after Ann stepped quietly out of the room it seemed that he was still feeling the touch of her soft hand and her presence in the room.

He knew he made a wry face when their probable thoughts struck him. What would a deathly sick man be doing out, alone, in the rain, not going to town to the doctor? Must have been hiding out in the hills. And that was true.

Her hand, so soft. . . . Years ago, as a small boy, he had felt a hand that soft. But he mustn't think. Not good for him, because fever was mounting in him. Better make up his mind right now to forget the feel of that girl's soft hand . . .

Cal Pearson remembered all this as clearly as if it were yesterday, though it had happened two years ago. He remembered how he had told them, just before preparing to leave them for good:

"I don't want yuh to think I'm as bad as this'll sound. There's good reasons—we won't go into 'em—but I'm not exactly what folks call good company. Yuh musta guessed."

"Yes, we guessed, and it don't matter none," Jim Blye broke in. "Yuh're

not *wanted* in these parts, are yuh? I mean, by the sheriff?"

"No, not right around here. I come a long ways."

"Then stick around. We can't pay real wages, 'course, but we can give yuh fair enough keep and some spendin' money every now and then—when we get it ourselves." He smiled cynically. "It would do you good, livin' here with us, goin' straight and forgettin' what won't do no good to remember."

If Ann Blye had said one word urging him to remain, he would have saddled up and left. But she said not a word. That made it easier. Besides she was Earl Munson's girl. And so Cal Pearson became a cowhand and dirt farmer, because things weren't going so well at all, and the Blyes couldn't eat any too much unless they raised some of their food themselves.

PEARSON stayed long enough to see the fight between the local ranchers and the big bank at Buena Vista go wrong. The bank had become the tool of the huge Sunset Land Association interests, one of the crookedest land cheats it had ever been Cal Pearson's misfortune to know anything about. They came to turn the Blyes out of their own property, but the sheriff who was in the land company's pay, reckoned without Jim Blye's iron will. But he knew it when the rancher planted himself with a gun before the ranchhouse.

"I've been a law-abidin' citizen all my life, and so has every Blye before us," Jim Blye had firmly announced. "But there ain't no law goin' to turn lawless and rob me of my land without me turnin' lawless, too. See? Two sides can play at breakin' honest men's laws, and no crooked Association with a crooked bank is goin' to turn my family out to starve—not before I kill somebody for doin' it, and mebbe get killed myself. Sheriff, it's goin' to cost human life to get any Blye off this here land. And my word is good, ain't it, Sheriff?"

Cal Pearson stuck with them. The sheriff came back with a posse—not of ranchmen and cowhands, but of hired thugs imported by the Association. Jim Blye sent his mother and sister over to some friend's place, while he took the front of the ranchhouse and Cal the rear. Guns blazed.

The sheriff had little heart for his work, and stayed out of the dirty game. The imported hirelings were tough with their mouths and their fists, and with clubs and knives and drygulching, but they were poor shots in man-to-man shooting, and they were being picked off one by one.

Tight-lipped, Pearson saw an Association man, one of the bosses, whipping up the hirelings' courage and leading them in a circle around to the rear. Cal Pearson raised his Colt. There was a vacancy in the Association executive offices. And a few minutes later, seeing their chief fall, the imported hirelings decided to go back and get men with better reputation as crack shots for this particular job.

But the die was cast. Jim Blye was outside the pale of the law. He was a killer—he counted eleven dead men, and several wounded had been taken away. There would be a price on his head. But as he had promised, he had charged his price in human life for the stealing of his land.

"I guess now I'm through around here," he said slowly, wiping his forehead with the back of a hand. "You came a long way, Cal—and I have to go a long way."

"What about Ann and yore mother?" Pearson demanded.

"They'll be took care of—somehow." Jim Blye laughed harshly. "After *this* little job, they'll be took care of all right, for awhile. Ain't a cattle man around here but would get up on his roof and cheer—eleven dead Association men, and one of the bosses. Yeah, it'll be an honor to lend a helpin' hand to any remainin' Blyes, for some

time to come. . . . Well, I can't stand around doin' nothing. I'll have to leave a little note of good-by to Mom and Ann. The sheriff'll deliver it. Gotta be goin'. Thanks, Cal. Yuh shore been fine. I shouldn't let yuh do this, but nobody—"

"Get a move on, Jim. Yuh'll look better on a hoss than under a tree. Go write your note. I'll saddle up. Good idea to chuck some of the pantry into a sack, too."

"All right. But you go right now, Cal. Nobody knows yuh was here shootin' it out, helpin' me. I'm on my own from here on out. Shake."

"I'm goin' with yuh," Pearson said firmly. "I'll shake on *that*—if yuh want to."

Blye was going to protest, but he saw something in Cal Pearson's eye, saw the tight firmness of the lips, and stuck out his hand again.

"If that's the way yuh want it," he said.

Before they made their get-away they had to shoot their way through several times. Pearson had a pouch half-filled with money, and without telling Blye he rode into one town and sent the money to Ann and her mother. Not till they came to a halt for the night, many miles away, did he tell Jim Blye.

"I sent that *dinero* yuh know I had to yore mother." He did not mention Ann. "Don't forget she was left without any. Besides, we'll get more. I jest tossed the package through the post-office window and rode hard."

JIM BLYE only looked at him, then turned his face away and looked far into the night. A storm was brewing. It rained that night, hard, and Pearson remembered one other night when it had rained hard.

The name Blye had become much too notorious for their safety, they were not long in discovering. And so was the face of Jim Blye—even covered with hard stubble as it now was. It was easy enough to go wrong, but impossible to go good again. A man couldn't kill eleven men and . . .

The Blye outfit that shortly was organized became notorious also. At first Cal Pearson was the leader, as two and then two more outlaws joined up with them. But he was silent by nature, cared little for bossing others around and keeping henchmen in line. Jim Blye's natural ability asserted itself gradually, and he took over. He was a natural leader, a big fellow, powerful, smart, quick with his tongue and just as quick with his hardware. There were no killings. There was no need for any, because folks at the end of a Blye gun valued their lives more than they did their cash.

At times, when Jim felt that the Blye gang was probably a little too much talked about, he cut activities short for weeks at a stretch. And even at the height of their activities they concentrated only on banks with Shylock reputations, and on the payrolls of big land operators who were known to be harsh, and often more than guessed to be crooked.

It was "Curly" Somers who caused trouble. Curly was a taciturn redhead who had joined up and maybe liked outlaw fame. Anyway, he fanned his gun at a bank teller during a job one day. After giving him his cut, Jim Blye said to him:

"Now yuh've got yores—so *get!*"

Curly's red hair got into his own eyes.

"Nobody's tellin' *me* to get!"

Curly Somers was aces with a gun, and there was no doubt he could make mincemeat of Jim Blye. Cal Pearson stepped in between the two. None of the gang had yet seen a Pearson gun in operation, for Cal Pearson never showed off. He did his daily chore of practising where nobody was likely to be watching.

Curly Somers glared at Pearson.

"Who asked you to butt in?" he snarled.

"Yuh was told to *get!*"

"I'll show yuh who'll get!"

Somers made a lightning draw. There was a roar and a belch of flame. Curly's smokeless gun fell from a grotesque hand. Cal Pearson let his Colt cool for a half a minute before reholstering it.

The killing of that bank teller was unfortunate not only to Curly Somers. The gang had to shoot their way out of two posses—the first big bloodshed in many months. One of Blye's men died, but Jim Blye and Cal Pearson came through unscratched.

"Seems I lead a charmed life," said Blye.

"And me?" asked Pearson.

"You got a right to one. Yuh could shoot yore way through anything. But where do I come off? I'm no fancy shooter. Most any man we got can pickle a shoe lace better than I could wing a whole boot."

It was less than a month after the Curly Somers affair when Jim Blye called Cal aside.

"Yuh could've blowed me over with a good cough when I saw it," he announced, and his face was deadly serious. "It's the Sunset Land Association, operating 'way out this way, too! Cal, for the first time I feel like making a *real* clean-up. What I mean, wipin' the whole treasury clean as a whistle. I don't want to leave a red copper on the floor!"

"Yuh're callin' the shot," Pearson said laconically. "When do we ride?"

THEY figured, hung around and spotted the lay, learned things, and figured some more. The men were getting restless. There were three of them, besides Pearson and Blye. The men grumbled. Suddenly Cal Pearson came to his feet. The memory of his job on Curly Somers was fresh on their minds as he spoke.

"You men don't like the way Jim is runnin' things? I do. I'm stickin'. You get!"

There was some argument but no gunplay, and they did get.

"What was the big idea?" asked Blye, who hadn't interfered, knowing that Cal Pearson must be having something up his sleeve.

"We don't need a Blye gang. The Sunset outfit is yore own private meat. How much yuh figger yore outfit was worth, back home? About ten-twelve thousand? Yuh have to get it back from the Association. But if we have to split five ways, yuh won't. You and me can do this alone. Yuh'll have yore rightful money back, and after that yuh can hop a train, buy a ranch a thousand miles away somewheres, and be a prosperous cattleman. Respectable again. Yore mother can come."

One circumstance was in their favor. The Association here did not work through the local bank. The big safe in the Association offices was their safety vault and bank.

One night Jim Blye took the watchman from the rear, lightly, with a warning. A gag, a bit of rope, and silence. Pearson went up one flight, let himself out of a hall window to the neighboring roof, swung himself to a drain pipe, then hand after hand pulled himself sideward, dangling over an open courtyard. He came to a window and rested on the ledge.

The window was closed and locked, but not barred. With a pocket knife Pearson easily dug away the dry putty. He whittled away a sliver of wood, slipped the blade in, levered the glass out, and held it. With the other hand he unlocked the window, slipped inside, set the glass lightly along the wall, and treaded through the darkness and the snoring of the guard. He was easy, too, for another gag and another bit of rope. Then Cal Pearson unlocked the hall door and admitted Blye.

Jim Blye had the explosive, and they set to work. The bound guard was pulled to safety. There was a loud explosion.

The paper money was all neatly done up in even little packages. Pearson held the sack while Jim Blye's big hands did the work. Outside, they

knew, men who had heard the explosion would be on the run. But in another minute Pearson and Blye were themselves on the run.

For a split second, on the way to their horses, it seemed that they would have to shoot. They would have used their guns, if they had not used their heads—and seen at once that not one of the peaceful townsmen had any desire to risk his life for the sake of the Association coffers. The get-away was easy. . . .

They shed their cow clothes and went East by train, as oil men. In the first city they stopped they bought clothes, banked seventeen thousand, six hundred dollars. Hanging out at the public library, they read books on business and real estate financing operations, watched and copied the manner and speech of local business men, and six weeks later alighted from a train in Arizona. They acted independently from each other, pretending not to be acquainted, each looking over ranch properties with a view to buying.

It was then that a Sunset Land Association detective caught up with Jim Blye, although he was traveling under an assumed name. It was at a bar. Blye and Pearson were back in range togs. Pearson was seated at a table with a rancher when the detective came up to them and asked the rancher, with a nod toward Jim Blye alone at another table:

"Do you know who that man is, over there?"

The ranchman shrugged. "Stranger to me. Seen him around lately."

"Why not go over and ask him?" suggested Pearson.

"That's *my* business," declared the man.

"And jest what is yore business?"

THE man walked away without answer.

"He's with the Sunset Land Association outfit," explained the rancher. "They're all like that—crooked as a dog's hind leg. Won't do anything to yore face that they can do behind yore back." He was silent for a moment, while Pearson figured out the unexpected situation with lightning rapidity. "Understan' that stranger is eyein' the properties out this way," the rancher said then. "Mebbe buyin'."

"Buyin'?" Pearson repeated. "Then mebbe I ought to meet him."

He rose and walked over to Blye, extended a hand and introduced himself. Blye got up, and as he spoke he was hearing Pearson's undertone in lipless words:

"Sunset detective. Went out. Mebbe coming back with help."

Cal Pearson brought him over to the rancher's table, introduced him under the assumed name, and they sat down. A quarter of an hour later the detective returned—with three men. The Association must have learned a lesson. These men were not the kind who could be shot down eleven to nothing. The ranchman followed Pearson's eye.

"The Association has bought up some of the gunfanners in this neck of the woods," he explained, with a wry laugh. "Yuh're lookin' at some now. Torkle, that detective, will feel safer now, inquirin' after strangers' identities."

"Looks like he might be kinda handy with hardware hisself," Pearson remarked idly.

"Is. But he don't have to prove it often. That's what they pay the badmen for, so's Association men won't run afoul of the law theirselves. Torkle ain't been around here long. Just a month."

Torkle did not look their way. Pearson and Blye glanced around. It looked bad. Men were standing along two walls, men who looked handy with guns. Cal Pearson got to his feet suddenly.

"Well, guess I'll be leavin' yuh," he said, waving a hand.

"Wait!" said Blye. "I'm goin', too."

That upset Pearson's plan to spring unexpected help from outside, but he knew that Blye did not want him to get into any trouble. After all, Cal Pearson was not known as one of the Blye outfit, and he had a big stake waiting. But there was no time now to argue with Jim Blye, for Torkle wheeled around suddenly and came swiftly to them.

He had a paper in his hand and slapped it down on the table. It was a picture of Jim Blye.

"Any relation of this man's?" he snarled.

Blye looked down at the sheet.

"Need my glasses," he said, coolly, looking straight and steadily into Torkle's eyes.

His left hand went to his blouse pocket. His right—

But somebody along the wall must already have drawn a gun. At its bark, Jim Blye shivered, stiffened as the impact of the bullet in his back whirled him sideward, and then he keeled over, drum-stiff, across the top of the table.

"Ann—M o m—g e t it—to—'em—" Cal Pearson heard Jim Blye's last, gasped words.

"Jim Blye kept his glasses in the wrong pocket," sneered Torkle, to Pearson. "You a friend of his?"

"I'm not a friend of yores—if that's what yuh want to know."

"Well, where do you keep your glasses?"

"Yuh'll find out, with the sheriff lookin' on! Jest one other thing—what's the name of that hero over there, by the wall, stowin' away the smokin' gun?"

Cal Pearson was staring into the muzzles of three weapons as he spoke, in the hands of the three men beside Torkle, and his back was as exposed as Jim Blye's had been a minute before.

"Just ask the sheriff, when you get around to it," laughed Torkle, turning and walking away. "You like sheriffs."

PEARSON did not leave until he had attended to Jim Blye's burial. His interest in it made people shrug, for it was known he had met Blye only a short time before the outlaw was killed. And it was known he had acted a little yellow, too, getting up fast and trying to escape the instant he'd seen trouble brewing.

He took the first train out, after the funeral. Two days later he found that Ann Blye was working in town, while her mother was working as housekeeper at the Fuller ranch. Mrs. Fuller was an invalid.

Though Pearson had not seen the Blyes in more than two years, he throttled the desire to see Ann, hired a horse to go see her mother. But even as he mounted he was wondering about Ann. Apparently she was not yet married. He wondered why.

But as he rode out of town, another thought came to his mind. Why tell the truth about Jim to Ann and her mother? Couldn't he simply say that Jim had gone to—to South Africa?

He was not prepared for what he found at the Fuller ranch. The first thing he saw was the X Bar F brand on a calf, and the second was Ann, standing at the window as he dismounted. She recognized him as quickly as he did her, and gasped in surprise.

"Mother!" she called out, in a tone at once amazed and controlled. "Here is Cal Pearson!"

Ann came out on the veranda with her arm linked with her mother's. Then she stepped swiftly forward to greet Pearson.

He saw at once the lines of deep sorrow and hardship in Mrs. Blye's face. In Ann's was sadness. He could well understand how much it had cost these two to have a son and brother who was an outlaw with a price on his head—a son and a brother from whom they had never been separated, who had been good to them in every way, and who had suddenly disappeared, never to be seen again.

"You're looking well, Cal," Ann said evenly, as they sat down on the veranda, instead of entering the house. Here they would be alone. "The open life apparently agrees with you, doesn't it?"

There was a veiled question in the words. After all, she could not be too sure that he had been with her brother. It took Cal Pearson a long time to get around to break the news. He decided first to tell the lie and see how they took it. If they believed it, and were happy, he would leave them that way. Otherwise—

"Jim always wanted to leave you people well off and safe before goin' far away," he began.

"Yes, we knew," said Mrs. Blye. "Earl Munson was always saying—" She stopped short, as though suddenly aware that Cal Pearson did not understand the Munson situation. "Earl, you know—no, you don't know—Earl is working with the Sunset Land Association now."

CAL PEARSON drew a sharp breath at the question that struck him suddenly. Had Earl been working with the Association *then*, at *that* time? But he did not ask it.

"I see," he said.

"Now, don't get things wrong," Mrs. Blye said quickly. "That's not the reason that Ann didn't—didn't—"

"Cal isn't interested in that, Mother," Ann said hurriedly.

"Of course he is," declared her mother. "The reason why she didn't marry him was because, well—what with Jim being a—a . . . She couldn't make herself do it!"

"I understand," said Pearson. "But it isn't as if Jim was bad. Earl knew that, and—and—" He caught Ann looking at him in a funny way and he stopped at once. Something leaped—then grew cold, ice cold, within him. "Anyway"—he deliberately changed the subject—"Earl must know what he's doin', workin' for that outfit. Tryin' to get even somehow, is he—for what they done to you all?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Something like that," declared Mrs. Blye. "Though we did try to stop him. But he's done good. Warned ranchers hereabouts before the Association and the bank got busy on them. He keeps saying he'll get something on the Sunset outfit and they'll have to give us back our place."

"Hmm—they'll find a cheaper way than that to keep his mouth shut," said Cal Pearson. "That outfit are hirin' better shots these days than they used to. Earl had better steer clear of the outfit entirely, Mrs. Blye. I aim to tell him that." Again he saw that peculiar look in Ann's eyes. "Besides, things are different now," he went on. "Like I said before, Jim wanted to see yuh well fixed. He's done that. Before he went to—to South Africa he—"

"Cal, it's good of you," Ann broke in, "and we understand your intentions, but we have already heard. The Association sent a man right out to tell us, as soon as they'd heard by wire from their man in Arizona about—about Jim." There was a catch in Ann's voice. "That's why I'm here with Mother, now. Tomorrow I go back to work."

"And Earl let 'em do that?" Pearson asked coldly.

"He didn't know until after we did."

Pearson shrugged, and fished some things out of his pockets. Little belongings that should go home, and an Omaha bank book.

"Well, Jim asked me to do this," he said, as he handed over the book. "Yuh've got seventeen thousand dollars here."

They gasped. Tears came to Ann's eyes. She gave back the bank book.

"We—we couldn't—"

"Listen!" Pearson urged quickly. "Mebbe seventeen thousand is more'n yore place was worth. But there ought to be some charge made for the trouble and pain and sorrow that crooked outfit cost you folks. And the land might be worth that much in a few years, anyway. But this here Sunset money—bein' Sunset money—is rightfully yores."

A glint, almost of defiance, came into Ann's eyes as swiftly she forestalled any objection her mother might raise.

"You're right, Cal! They did steal it from us! Now that we've got it back—we are even."

She looked at the book again, and slowly turned it back to him. "This is a joint account, Cal. Half of this is yours."

"This is special, Ann. I already had more'n enough, got my cut out of other things, and plenty has been turned over to other folks, by Jim, that he took from other crooks that stole it from them honest people. Jim put this in the bank with my name, too, so's there wouldn't be any trouble for yuh—in case somethin' happened to him. He was goin' to buy a ranch in Arizona, under a new name, and call yuh out there. I can get the money and transfer it to you folks. This is all yore money."

MRS. BLYE was crying. She got up and excused herself, saying she had some work to do, and entered the house.

"I'm thinkin' you folks better not stay around here, now," Pearson said. "Go some place else—Texas—California—Arkansas. Mebbe yuh can fix it up with Earl Munson, too."

Ann was holding back her tears by sheer power of will, and again he saw that look in her eyes. He sat rigid, silent, gripping himself with iron.

"Cal," Ann said, her voice low, "Mother said—I refused Earl because of what Jim became—and the Blye reputation. I suppose you could understand how I might feel that way, couldn't you?"

That same look in her eyes, only deeper, much deeper, now. It was as if he were being searched, searched for something that might be hiding somewhere deep within him.

"Yes, I can understand," he said. "But—"

She interrupted before he could say more.

[Turn page]

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"But between some people such a feeling need never exist, need it? I mean, there are some cases where a man, or a woman, with a name that has been hurt, could go right ahead as though everything were the same. It would all depend on *who* the two persons are, wouldn't it?"

"You've seen clean through me, Ann," he said. "I've often wondered if you ever had. But I—I've killed men, Ann, and you—yuh're as lily-white as they make 'em. Yore brother was forced into anything he done, and we all know it. Yuh can't talk yoreself out of marryin' a man like Earl Munson, and takin' up with a killer instead, jest because of what yore brother was forced to do. Don't try to hurt yoreself when yuh don't have to, Ann. Yuh could never be happy like that—and what did you ever do to deserve unhappiness? Yuh're the most wonderful girl I've ever known and will ever know. It's Earl yuh really want, so—Well, I'm goin' away again."

"But you don't understand, Cal. And Earl does!"

He was on his feet. But at these words he felt suddenly weak. He spoke up fast, to hide his feelings and to make one thing vaguely clear.

"Look, Ann," he said. "There's something I must tell yuh. I had a job of work to do, out in Arizona, but I didn't do it. I didn't do it because I had to be shore that I'd get here and attend to things that had to be attended to. If anything happened to me, too, this money Jim had for yuh might have been lost. But now yuh've got it. I'll fix things up with that bank where it is, and then I'm going back to Arizona. I've still got a job to do."

"How soon?" Keen disappointment was in Ann's voice.

"This evenin'."

Cal Pearson felt clean, clean all the way through, on his way out to Arizona. He was not the man for Ann Blye. Earl Munson was her kind of man.

He noted the surprise of the people

of the Arizona town at seeing him again—this man they had called yellow, who had ducked at the bar, arranged a funeral later, and then dodged out of town, after promising to see Torkle again. Pearson went at once to the sheriff.

"Understand me," he said. "I'm not lookin' for trouble. I'm peaceful. But this Torkle, and the three men, and a certain feller who lines up against the wall and finds a great big target in a man's back—they might try to pick some trouble with me again. Who was the wall man?"

"Bill Fuld," said the sheriff. "But he was workin' with the land comp'ny detective, understand. And this Blye was resistin' arrest."

"Yeah. Of course the Sunset Land Company man is no law officer and has no right to order public executions, but I get it, Sheriff. Yuh're jest another man with a star and a family at home. But I have no family, and I don't need any more stars than any company man needs. Yuh better hang around the Paydirt Bar evenings from now on, Sheriff. S'long."

THAT same evening Cal Pearson saw Fuld. Torkle and the others were not there. The sheriff was. Pearson waved to Fuld.

"Greetin's, Back-shooter. Plug any more spines while I was away?"

Fuld sputtered. Pearson egged him on.

"I don't mean to insult yuh, *amigo*," Pearson said mildly. "I was jest talkin' about plain facts. I happen to know yuh like 'em when their back is facin' yuh. Do yuh find it so much safer that way? Or is it jest a habit?"

That was too much. Fuld reached. Cal Pearson triggered.

In the silence that followed the gun's roar, Pearson shook his head and smiled at the sheriff.

"Funny," he drawled, "the things a man has to do in self-defense. I wonder if Torkle and three other men ever stopped to think about it. If they drop around I'll discuss it with 'em."

[*Turn page*]

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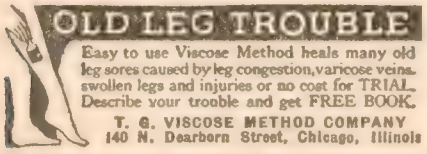
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For three days Torkle and his men evaded Cal Pearson's persuasive discussion. On the fourth day Ann Blye arrived, located Pearson at his hotel. She had to wait for him, and while she waited she heard what had happened. And what was going to happen.

"I was a fool, Cal," she pleaded with him as soon as she saw him. "I should have known what you were up to. But I wasn't able to think—at the time. Not till I told Earl what you'd said, did I really know. Earl understood. He told me at once what you'd gone back here for. And so I—"

Pearson nodded. "But there are four more, Ann. And now yuh see what I am—I mean the kind of man I am. Never do—for you."

"Would you like to do—for me?"

"I guess yuh know how I feel about that."

"Tell me! Would you?"

"There was never anything I'd like more."

"Then it will be easy. All you have to do is go away from here with me, right now, Cal."

"But there are four more, Ann."

"There are *no* more, Cal! You've accounted for the murderer who killed Jim. You say there are four more, and I say there are no more. So there's a mistake in your arithmetic, or in mine. Who is mistaken, Cal—you or I?"

He felt his throat swelling. She was as quick to notice the little signs as she had ever been. She came forward, stopped directly before him.

"Who is mistaken, Cal, you or I?" she repeated. "Who is right? Who is right?"

Still he could not answer. She put her hands on his shoulders, then slowly her arms around his neck as she raised herself on tiptoe, and lifted her lips.

"It is so little to do, Cal. So very little." Her hair was a scent of heaven. Her gray eyes closed, no longer searching him. "You'll do—Cal. Oh, Cal!"

Before he could make up his mind he heard himself saying, hoarsely:

"I'll do."

GUN MAGIC

(Concluded from page 111)

"Now, damn yuh!" he yelled exultingly. "We're on even footin', with no chance for tricks! Use yore irons, Veen!"

Astonishment, then terror, flooded into Veen's face. He triggered those long six-guns. But Hal Burton's slugs reached their mark first. The big outlaw went down, twisting around like a fallen tree. His bullets went uselessly into the air.

Old Si Hartler, on a horse, was fighting his way through the herd. The oldtimer reached the fence, jumped across.

"Tarnation! Yuh went an' done it!" Hartler yelled. "I was comin' to help yuh, whether yuh wanted it or not, but them damn dogies held me back. How did yuh—"

"I jest did me some figgerin'," Burton explained. "It just didn't stand to reason that Veen could be gun-swift enough, with them ungainly irons, to down all the men he killed. So I got to thinkin', about what yuh told me about his victims bein' shot through the belly, but the bullets tearin' away their back clear up at the shoulders. Then, too, I knew that Veen always was plumb particular about meetin' his victims alone. So I put two an' two together.

"I figgered Veen started shootin' at long range, where there was next to no chance of him bein' hit, drew the other gent's fire, then yelled an' pretended he was hit an' took a dive. The other gent, thinkin' that he'd downed Harg Veen came nearer. Without warnin' Veen opened up with the gun he had hidden under his body, fired up at the victim at close range.

"Veen was so careful about havin' nobody around to talk about his method that he never dreamed somebody'd give them his own medicine. He thought he'd downed me by a chance shot, so he came near me. I jumped up, gave him a chance like he never done his victims. I reckon we can tear down that barricade now an' take the drive through."

Old Si Hartler slapped his thigh, stuck out a gnarled hand.

"Fooled the killer with his own brand of gun-magic! Son, put 'er there!"

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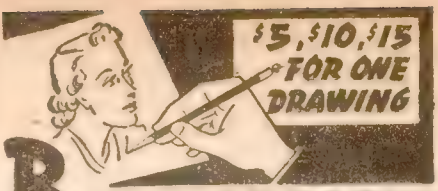

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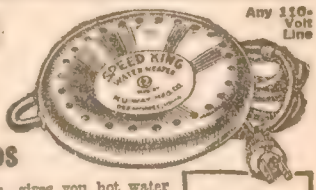

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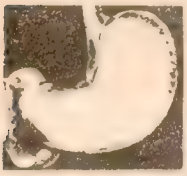

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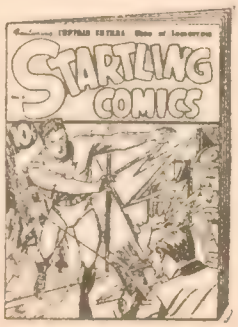

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 112)

champion steer wrestler. Dale Adams, champion bull rider. Paul Bond, champion bareback bronc rider. Clyde Burk also won the title of the association as champion steer roper.

The Southwest Rodeo Association takes in a number of rodeos in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa.

Annie Oakley's Monument

In the settling of an estate near Minster, Ohio, in December, the homestead of the famous lady rifle shot "Annie Oakley" was sold at auction, and the new owner also became owner of the memorial shaft erected on the homestead near the highway. This shaft was erected by a fund raised by historical societies throughout the country, but it is unlikely that the new owner will disturb the shaft, which stands as a monument in memory of the great woman firearms expert.

Mrs. C. F. Hafley, widow of the late C. F. Hafley (California Frank), who in rodeo and wildwest is known as Mamie Francis, lady horseback rifle shot, is wintering on the Hafley ranch near Ridgeway, Colorado. She is now the only living lady horseback rifle shot.

Reports early in January were to the effect that a number of rodeo hands were stranded in Tulsa, Oklahoma, lured there by a traveling promoter who announced that he would stage rodeos in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Miami, Florida, but the rodeos did not materialize. This same traveling promoter has hurt the rodeo game in a number of cities and right now there are a number of legitimate rodeo producers who expect to do something to get rid of the unreliable promotions during the coming season.

The End of "Taxi"

Mildred Murphy, of Barto, Florida, who presented her trained cowpony "Taxi" with the JE Ranch Rodeo the latter part of last season, had the misfortune to lose the animal last December.

Mildred was helping her husband, who is a horse dealer, pen some wild horses on their ranch near Barto. She was riding "Taxi" which was really a cowpony. The pony, in a dash to head off a bunch of the horses, crashed through some brush and fell into an old well. Mildred was thrown clear of the well and uninjured, but the little cowpony suffered a broken back and had to be destroyed.

Lucky Boy Williams

Joe M. Pickett, nephew of the late Bill Pickett, the Texas negro cowboy who originated bulldogging, is wintering in Chicago. Joe is the dusky riding and bulldogging demon taking part in many Eastern rodeos under the name of Lucky Boy Williams.

Buddy Mefford produced and directed a rodeo exhibition as the principal attrac-

tion of the Pinellas County Fair at Largo, Florida, January 14th to 18th.

The first rodeo of 1941 was staged by Carlton Brothers at Myakka City, Florida, New Year's day. The affair drew a big crowd, but the attraction in addition to the rodeo was a barbecue in which several beeves were roasted in real western fashion over an open pit of live coals. A real barbecue is a great crowd attractor all by itself.

R. R. Doubleday, for more than thirty years considered America's official rodeo photographer, again wintered at Bonita Springs, Florida.

The 1941 Season

The 1941 Rodeo season really opened with the rodeo in connection with the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colorado, January 11th to 18th.

Here are the dates of other rodeos following the Denver show for the early part of the season. Stock Show Rodeo, Houston, Texas, February 5th to 12th; Phoenix, Arizona, Rodeo, February 13th to 16th; Fiesta De Los Vaqueros Rodeo, Tucson, Arizona, February 21st to 23rd; Stock Show Rodeo, San Angelo, Texas, February 28th to March 3rd; Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show Rodeo, Fort Worth, Texas, March 7th to 16; American Legion Club Rodeo, Cleveland, Ohio, April 18th to 27th; Red Bluff, California, Rodeo, April 19th and 20th; The Garden Rodeo, Pittsburgh, Pa., April 30th to May 10th.

A Fatal Accident

Rose Davis, cowgirl bronc rider who formerly lived in Fort Worth, Texas, was killed in a fall from a Pennsylvania Railroad Express train at New Brunswick, New Jersey, on the night of January 7th, while she was en route from New York to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to be at the bedside of her dying grandmother.

Her body was found by railroad detectives in a search that was made for many miles along the railroad after a porter had reported a woman missing from the train. Just how the fatal accident occurred is not known.

Rose Davis won the World's Championship in cowgirls' bronc riding at Madison Square Garden in 1933 and again in 1935. She entered the contest at the Garden in 1939 but withdrew to go to the Chicago rodeo. She spent most of the 1940 season as a riding instructor on a guest ranch in New Jersey and took part in the Madison Square Garden rodeo last October, where she seemed in excellent form. She was the widow of Tom Breeden, cowboy bulldogger, who was killed by the accidental discharge of a rifle which he was preparing for target practice a year ago.

Champions

The following champions were crowned World Champions of the various events

[*Turn page*]

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of cowboy sport for the season of 1940 by the Rodeo Association of America in convention at Salinas, California, January 23rd, 24th, and 25th. The awards were made on the number of points scored by the various contestants, in various events, during the 1940 rodeo season at R.A.A. rodeos, and the titles will be carried by the winners until the close of the 1941 season when the scores are again totaled and titles again awarded.

The title of All American, or World's Champion all round cowboy, was awarded to Fritz Truan.

Truan also won the title of Champion Bronc Rider. Carl Dossey won the title of Champion Bareback Bronc Rider. The title of Champion Calf Roper was awarded to Toots Mansfield. Homer Pettigrew won the title of Champion Steer Wrestler. Dick Griffith was awarded the title of Champion Bull Rider. Jack Wade, the title of Champion Steer Decorator. Clay Carr, the title of Champion Single Roper. Pete Grubb, the title of Champion Team Roper.

Cash Awards

$1,950 in cash, together with a number of gold and silver belt buckles, and one $250 saddle was awarded along with the titles. The cash and other awards were donated by firms who deal with cowboys. Fritz Truan was the heaviest winner, receiving a $500 cash award and a gold and silver belt buckle donated by the Levi Strauss Company, makers of cowboy range pants, this award being made in addition to the all round title for winning the greatest number of points. In winning the title of champion bronc rider, he received $200 cash donated by Harry Rowell, rodeo stock contractor.

Chief Oneida

Lieut. J. Riley Wheelock (Chief Oneida) full-blooded Indian, leader of the Indian band furnishing the music last season for the JE Ranch Rodeo, died of a heart attack at his home in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, Sunday, January 12th. Wheelock, a graduate of Carlysle University, was a noted band leader, and was

Editor WEST

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overseas during the world war as conductor of a military band. He had conducted the JE Ranch Indian band for four years, his band having already been engaged for the coming season with the same rodeo. It will be conducted by his son, Raymond Wheelock, who likewise succeeds his father as chief of the Oneidas. Wheelock was sixty-five at the time of his death.

Well, Waddies, as an old cowboy would say, I reckon as how this is gossip aplenty for one time, an' I will be sayin *Adios.*

—FOG HORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Hola, readers—now it's my turn to chat. Fog Horn sure gave us some interesting palaver and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Well, whether you have bouquets or beefs, please write us and tell us what you think of Fog Horn's department as well as everything else in WEST. Address The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York City—and remember a postcard will do as well as a sealed letter. One of these issues I'll print excerpts from some of the swell mail we've been receiving. Do your part with suggestions, criticisms and opinions. We pay close attention to readers' comments in planning future issues.

Talking of coming issues—the next one will be a humdinger. Yes, sir, the next WEST will be a ring-tailed, rip-roaring rodeo of fiction thrills! It starts off with a grand complete book-length novel—MUSTANG VALLEY FEUD, by Claude Rister. This is the epic of Keith Lane, who comes to the town of Colton and as the mysterious Purple Rider does quite a bit of cleaning up. Long loopers run to cover when the Purple Rider arrives—and you'll enjoy following him through a brilliant series of exploits that end up when a deep mystery of the range is cleared. And then—you'll be amazed at the big surprises in store at the end of the novel!

You know Claude Rister—he's long been a favorite of western fans everywhere. And MUSTANG VALLEY FEUD is his best novel to date! So you can see what a great treat is awaiting you!

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Hasta la Vista, pards!

—THE EDITOR.

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28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
6.00-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
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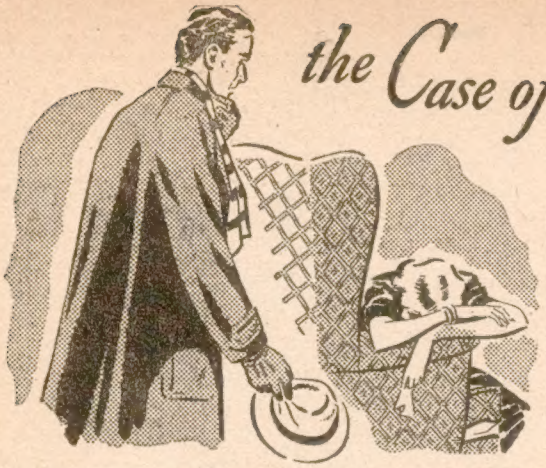

1 Ann doesn't cry easily—but that night I found her in tears! "I can't help it," she sobbed. "All the things we were going to do—buy a car, build a home—remember? And here we are—married three years, and just barely making ends meet! I thought our dreams might come true—but it's no use." I made up my mind right then to "have it out" with the boss.

2 "Look here!" he said. "I can't *pay* you more unless you're *worth* more! And frankly, John, you lack the *training* a bigger job needs. Ever hear of the International Correspondence Schools?"

3 When I learned the boss was a former I.C.S. student, I signed up *quick!* And what a difference it made in my work! I'd never realized until then how *little* I knew about the business.

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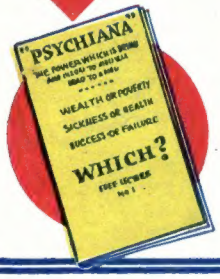

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